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THE TRY-OUT



This is the story of a theatrical company touring the provinces with a new play. Not only is the play a dreadfully unprofitable one, but its author—a school-master on holiday—travels round with the company and bedevils them further by constantly rewriting his scenes. It is left to Sebastian Shepherd, the tough, efficient stage manager, to turn a bad play into "good theatre" and to jockey a company, unsettled by personal feuds and grievances, over crisis after crisis.

By the same author



THE MOON TO PLAY WITH

THE TRY-OUT

A NOVEL BY

John Wiles

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FOR CYRIL AND STREAK

who
'taught him all he knew'

This is a novel about the theatre. Because it concerns such a compressed and insular world the number of people likely to identify themselves, or others, with my characters could be large. It is therefore necessary that I emphasize that not a single character in this book has been deliberately based on any actual person or persons, living or dead. They are all, without exception, completely fictional.

J. W.

Chapter One

I STOOD WITH my foot on the line and felt the trains running north. I thought, Now the curtain rises and I am alone with the future an impenetrable darkness before me. Here, now, the piece commences and in the wings the prompter's clock is already ticking away the minutes of our performance. I looked at my watch. There were only six weeks left.

The porter was small and wrinkled and brown. He said, "There's no sign of it yet," and then peering more closely, added, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

I said, "I used to live here. For two years I collected engine numbers on this platform every Saturday afternoon."

He nodded, "I thought so," and spat. He seemed in no way surprised that he should have remembered me, one boy from among thousands. I wanted him to go on—I wished to draw him out about the small face under the dark green cap—but there was no time and he had already lost interest. "Best thing for you," he said, "is to ask at the Stationmaster's Office."

I thanked him and he smiled. "You had a pal. A kid called Adam. A funny name. Whatever happened to him?"

In the office I took off my gloves and held them to

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the stove. There was a kettle standing on it. The warm smell of paraffin-oil rolled round me in heavy comforting waves. The Stationmaster was saying, "I'm sorry, sir. It's been delayed near Winchester. We'll get it down as soon as we can. That——" He was holding a slip of paper in his hand.

I asked, "How long will it take? One hour? Two hours?" but he shrugged. "Can't say, you know. It depends on the through traffic. Might be anything, up to this evening," and I could see Robin's face and Aaron's and feel the growing panic all round me. "It's important," I insisted. "We should have been unloading now," and he nodded. "We'll do the best we can, sir." With that I had to be content.

Outside the station I saw a tram and leapt aboard as it lurched off down Station Road, past the Methodist Chapel and the second-hand clothing shop to the corner where one could see the ships bobbing in the harbour down below.

I found I had climbed the stairs from habit. To sit on the top deck was more exciting. It was like breaking a bronco (I had not done that) or hitting the railroad (nor that) or breasting a raging sea. (That I had done.)

Now we had left Station Road and the whole contraption was swaying about me and the wheels were screeching and the shops and houses were tilting grotesquely past the windows. I held on grimly and imagined myself a twelve-year-old boy with a bookful of engine numbers and poached eggs for tea, with Adam by my side (strange he should have remembered him. What *had* happened to him?) and

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a front-row seat for the second show at the Hippodrome with Mum. But then the dream faded and the thought of the theatre swung back like an axe to sever the past.

We were slipping past the old brown cobbles (how like ripples on a teasing sea) and stopping at the Town Hall clock. And it was time to descend those rusty steps and pay my fare and watch the unsurprised faces of the department stores as they slid in careful decorum along the length of the Gladstone Road.

"A bitter cold day," said the conductor, and he blew on his hands to prove his point. "Pity us poor blighters wot 'as to work on Sundays."

I did and said so and left him at the stop to walk to the theatre. Behind me the deserted tram rattled its way across the cobbles to the Market Square and the docks.

On the corner I paused. Here was the shop where I used to buy my model aeroplanes. Now I pressed my nose against the glass and saw the shining angels suspended on strings, calmly, aloofly, as poised as any dream to tear the heart from a twelve-year-old boy. Ranged about them were the All-Kits and Meccano and Handy Home Builders (I could feel the tight screws under my fingers) and the glittering accessories. But toys, toys, all of them, cast into the shadows by the latest gem of the super-craftsman, the model jet assembly, added since my day, sleek as any lancet, posed still stage centre, and I could hear the whistle and shriek at Farnborough and the rattle of pom-poms on the Malta run.

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"I hate you all!" I heard myself saying. But that was nonsense of course. I had nothing but admiration for these slim-hipped gods with their Delta wings and Olympian names. And hate was too clinical a label for the amorphous, troubled emotion which assaulted me, grey, heaving like a sea on a rain-swept evening, to leave me shuddering, a twenty-eight-year-old stage manager with a tour to run and a theatre to face.

Matchett, Link, Peal and Calthorpe. That was better. Now the ship righted itself and the sea dropped away to reveal these four landmarks, library, butcher, dairy and draper, familiar in their litany. How often had I repeated their names to myself as I stood back to wind in the queue at the Hippo?

Matchett, Link, Peal and Calthorpe
I had a pig but never ate pork

was one of the rhymes which has stayed with me through sixteen years of bewildered bumbling. Adrift, significant of what? it floated still merrily in my memory while more important events had filled with water and dropped, dead-weight, to the bottom. (What *had* happened to Adam?)

And now the theatres. First the Hippo, stucco, drab, with peeling posters and unswept foyer where last night's audience had dropped their programmes before stepping into the rain to catch their last trams home to Seaferry, Dolney and Lighthouse Hill. *Peter Pan with Alice Mason*. Second great month of run announced the posters, but there was mud

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where the name of Wendy should have been and a pencil drawing of I don't know what beside the face of Alice Mason.

Reluctantly I tore myself away. Newspaper flapped in the gutter with the gentle, straining motion of birds with broken backs. I looked up and saw it; blankly it stared back at me, assuring me there was no alternative. *Storm Thunder, a new play by George Bale. Theatre Royal. Monday.*

So here we were, the inevitable destination. The stage-door faced me like a drawbridge. PRIVATE, NO ADMITTANCE the legend ran. Still I stood, unwilling to push it open, hoping against hope that a mistake had been made, that this was not the theatre, that I had come down a week too early and that I would find the door locked and barred against my entrance.

Dido was sweeping the stage. In her jeans and shirt she looked unreal, nymphaean; the gloomy working light caught and held the floating motes of dust around her. They were Caliban's clothes. She seemed to have none of her own. She stared when she saw me.

"What are you doing here? Weren't you supposed to be bringing the scenery?"

I laughed. "The scenery's at Winchester, my love."

"But that's *terrible!*" She dropped the broom and ran down to the floats. "What's going to happen now?"

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"It'll come," I said. "It always does."

"But still—the dress rehearsal?" She had red hair tied back in a pony-tail and a broad face with high cheekbones. When she sulked, her eyes half-closed to give her a Mongolian expression, flat and brooding. She was seventeen and had been on the stage since she was five. During rehearsals I had grown fond of her. Her high spirits, her rivalry with her brother livened the company. Now she squatted at the footlights and regarded me with wide eyes. "But what are you *doing* about it, Sebastian? It may not come for *ages*!"

"Then we'll all go home and call off this ridiculous tour," I said. I could think of no better solution and for a moment my mind lingered on this unlikely miracle. "A telegram will come from Felix and we'll tear down the posters and go to bed."

"Not a telegram," she replied gravely. "That costs money and you know how Felix is about filthy Lucrece."

"Adamant," I agreed, "and yet always negative."

"But this is serious!" she continued. "How can you joke about it? Does Aaron know?"

"He hasn't arrived yet. At least I hope not. But he won't worry. His job's finished. If one can call this show produced, his job's finished."

"I think you're awful," she said and scrambled to her feet. "You have no sense of responsibility. If this happened with any other company you'd get the sack." She did a pirouette and ended up in fifth position.

"If this were any other company," I pointed out, "I'd have a sense of responsibility."

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"I'm sure that's not the way for a stage manager to talk," she answered and tried a fouette which didn't quite come off. "Uncle Dan would have cut his throat before saying that."

"Don't tell me you have relations also," I said. "I really couldn't bear it, darling."

"He was the stage director on my first tour," she replied. "He was an angel. I was so in love with him. All the kids adored him but he preferred me. He called me Baby Plum and gave me chocolate creams."

"How old were you at the time?"

"Eight. Or nine." She retrieved the broom and leaned against it with a dreamy look in her eye. "He had a bald head and a pink nose and a bowler hat. He was mad about gin-rummy. They had to drag him away from it to bring down the curtain."

"In truth a shocking perversion."

"He was sweet," she declared, "and not the teeniest bit perverted." She performed an arabesque with the aid of the broom and called out primly, "Anyway he would never have lost his scenery."

"I accept your rebuke," I said and went to hang up my coat. From under the stage came the sound of hammering. It was hollow and metallic and in that confined space it resounded like the monstrous beating of the *Turandot* gong. "Is that your brother?" I called. "The savage and deformed slave, Caliban?"

"Robert," she said and she emphasized the name, "Robert is making something."

"If he can whip up two sets, one with a bay

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window and the other with a short flight of stairs, before four o'clock this afternoon," I replied, "I should be very grateful."

She giggled despite herself. "Don't you really worry, Sebastian?"

I wondered. There were all sorts of answers to that. But they cut too deep. They were not the sort of replies one can bandy about in a light-hearted fashion. Besides I liked Dido and I didn't want her to grow concerned about me. And she would. I knew she would. She was that kind of girl. "I worry," I said and smiled. "Be a love and call him, dear. We'd better get on with the dressing-rooms before the squeaking mummies appear."

"You make them sound like children's toys," she said.

"To me they are." And I don't know why I said that for it was one of the answers I had decided not to give her.

Caliban came. He was taller than his sister and older by a year. He had barely outgrown the spotty stage and was as clumsy as a giraffe on roller skates. He was wearing an old pair of corduroys and a filthy polo-neck sweater which once had been white and now carried the initials R. L. emblazoned across the chest in red poster paint presumably to discourage Dido from borrowing the treasured garment. He shot out of the orchestra pit, saying, "I say, Mr. Shepherd, is it true? What on earth will we do?" to drop his hammer and curse and bang his head on the brass rail. Then he subsided with a fretful sigh into the front-row stalls and regarded me distraught.

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Dido laughed. "You're such a goop, darling. Sebastian has it all worked out. The tour will be cancelled and we'll all go home and you'll be able to do your nice National Service after all."

He swore at her mildly. There was a remarkable affection between these two. They came of a theatrical family and as tots had braved the icy rigours of the Italia Conti and Edna Russel schools. Between them they had a list of successes which made the other children in *Spotlight* look like not very hopeful amateurs. Both had appeared in the West End (Caliban with the Old Vic) and Dido had had seven films to her credit before she was fifteen. They were great favourites with the landladies of theatrical digs and even their strange habit of sharing the same room on tour was (so Dido assured me) condoned by these august and eminently respectable bodies. They were young and gay and infinitely alive and made me feel like the Ancient Mariner "whose beard with age is hoar".

Caliban was my A.S.M. He said, "I've cleaned up the dressing-rooms if you want to allocate them, Mr. Shepherd."

His words fell like drops of water and immediately disappeared. An air of oppression was filling the theatre. I wondered how many actors had boomed their parts in this ominous shell before us. The shadows were saturated with their echoes.

I struggled to my feet. A dead-weight seemed to be pressing me down. I said, "We may as well. Darling Alex had better share No. 1 with his new bride."

Caliban hesitated. "I thought of Miss Waring—"

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Dido said suddenly, "Oh gosh, Sebastian, I forgot. *He's* here."

"Who?"

"The author. George Bale."

"He can't have it," I said, and stopped. "The author? The first time we've seen him. What's he like?"

She pouted and thought diligently. "Nice," she decided. "Tallish, thinnish, with glasses. He seems dreadfully nervous. Sort of apologetic."

"Can you wonder?" I said. "Have you *read* his play, Miss Lambert?"

Caliban giggled but said nothing. He was still at the stage when he was taking his cue from me. I gave it to him: "It's not a play, it's a tract. Pompous, sentimental, pretentious rubbish. It's a Victorian engraving. An inflated Monarch of the Glen with overtones by Holman Hunt."

Caliban giggled again. Now he knew what to say. "It's bloody awful," he agreed huskily. "We'll never be ready in six years—much less six weeks."

Dido said slowly, "Well, he's nice and I'm sorry for him. He's like a fish out of water. What does he know about us? Imagine if you had to teach some of his boys!"

Caliban flinched. "I bet I'd make a better job of it than he does," and looked at me for approval.

I grinned. "They'd tie you in knots within three minutes, Caliban, my slave. Leave schoolmastering to the usher and playwriting to the playwright. Then may he play the fool nowhere but in his own house."

He said, "*The Tempest*," and she said, "*Hamlet*."

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I offered my arm to her. "Get thee to a nunnery, my love, for we'll to the dressing-rooms."

Across the mirror in No. 1 somebody had scrawled *We are such stuff as dreams are made of* and I thought of the angels suspended in their shop window awaiting the touch of the dreamer. Even the model jet assembly needed the guiding finger to put it through its paces. And without the attentions of the puppet-master, our strings hung limp.

I saw him then. He was standing at the call-board reading the notice about the set-up. He said humbly, "Good morning," and drew aside as if we were some kind of state procession with our little cards and packets of drawing-pins and Caliban's fountain-pen which never worked.

The corridor hid him from sight and I said, "He has that soiled look in his eye."

Caliban guessed wildly. "The Dream?" and I laughed, "Pure Sebastian Shepherd misquoting a history master who should have known better."

Audrey and her husband, Stephen Boxer, were the first to arrive. I had sent the children to coffee and George Bale was prowling about the foyer (apart from that first greeting I had ignored him. His ghastly play with its "gwillens" and "Mollath Dews" and "It's a bad omen; there are evil spirits in the bog" lines had condemned him long ago) so I was pleased to see somebody I liked.

Audrey had emphasis. She appeared at the floats while I was pacing out the stage-plan. She merely said, "Hullo, Bas, set delayed? You know my husband, don't you? Stephen, this is Bas Shepherd, our stage manager."

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I had met him before and liked him. Mainly because he was not an actor. He was the Consultant Psychiatrist at St. Gregory's in Paddington and by all reports a good one. In appearance he resembled what one expected of a capable doctor: of medium height, slim and rather dark; quiet but with an air of still authority about him. He wore discreet bow-ties and a heavy pair of spectacles which reflected nothing.

He said, "I hope I shan't be in the way. I've got a few weeks off and I thought I'd follow the tour for a while. Will you object?"

I replied, "Not at all. You can take my place if you like," and he grinned. "I knew we had met before. You are the most onstage-struck person I know."

"Sebastian is a stage manager," Audrey said, "and all good stage managers loathe actors. Their idea of heaven is a show with lights and scenery and *no* cast." She was workmanlike even off the stage. When she spoke, she SPOKE. When she was silent, she was SILENT. She was by far the most talented member of the company, knew it and wasted no time emphasizing it. Great things were destined for her. She had already made a name for herself at the Memorial Theatre with Gielgud and in *Antony* with the Oliviers. A sudden illness, a series of flops and a severe attack of over-caution on the part of the London managers had forced her to accept the part of Rachel in *Storm Thunder*. Felix had been lucky to get her. She would never drop so low again. She had the best agent in the business and a capacity for work that would have made Hercules look like a hobo sleeping in the Arcadian sun.

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She caught up her suitcase and said, "I'll find my dressing-room. I want to try a new make-up," and Stephen replied, "I'll bring the rest of the stuff from the car." They were like that with one another: neither the master, neither the slave. They respected each other as equals. It was the most perfect stage marriage I knew. I could only hope that darling Alex would treat his new wife half as well, but I doubted it. He was an actor. Audrey was a person.

The next arrivals were Aaron Moran and Robin Stacey, the producer and stage director. I recognized Aaron's wheezing long before I heard his sepulchral booming. "My God, I might have guessed it. Not a stitch of work done," followed immediately by Stacey's concerned, "What's happened, Bas? Have they lost our set?"

To these two exclamations the answer was obvious. I made it. After that Robin grew very grave and very efficient and busied himself with the door-keeper's phone while Aaron thumped about the stage with his stick, breathing audibly and muttering, "As shallow as a bird-bath. I should have known it. My God, I should have known it. Trust Felix to book us a shoe-box like this," and waving his hand at the flies, declared scornfully, "Of course this equipment is rotten. It'll all come down on the first night." Then he grew sulky and would not speak at all until Robin returned to say there was a cadaverous gentleman in one of the dressing-rooms and would Aaron please come and entertain him for he appeared to be the author.

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Oh no, Christ! this was too much. (Wheeze.) Who did Felix think he was? (Wheeze.) Or Robin for that matter? It was not his job to entertain authors. (Wheeze.) That should have happened a long time ago. (Cough and momentary loss of breath.) And in any case he was busy and as far as he was concerned, the author could lock himself in the lavatory (wheeze) and read *Playwriting for Amateurs* from cover to cover. And jolly good luck to him.

All of which didn't sound very encouraging for George Bale.

Things were growing a little noisier now. A group of stage hands appeared, headed by the local S.M. —stage carpenter, to announce, "Y' ought've known that train'd be late. We never bother t' get here before 'leven," followed shortly by the return of Caliban and Dido with the news that the lady who ran the snack bar across the road had never heard of *Storm Thunder* and couldn't somebody please do something about *publicity*.

I laughed. It seemed to me the tour was really getting under way. This disorganization was the inevitable curtain-raiser. Robin came up to announce that the truck had arrived and that he'd sent Caliban and a party of men to the station, and just as I was thinking of slipping out for a cup of coffee he re-appeared with the author in tow.

He signalled, "And this is Sebastian Shepherd, our stage manager. He hates the theatre."

"What's so strange about that?" I asked. "Does anybody like it?"

"Oh, I do," said the schoolmaster, and then

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blushed because it came out in an eager, trying-to-please tone. "Not that I know—"

"You mustn't let him frighten you," Robin said smoothly. He had the trick of dealing with people. That was why he was such a good stage director. "His bark is worse than his bite."

"You haven't felt my bite," I assured him. I liked Robin and respected him. I was thinking then that ~~he~~ was too good for the theatre. He really deserved a better fate.

"I'm sure you have a very tedious job," Bale said, still trying to please me. "I used to stage manage our school shows—"

"Fancy," I said and Robin broke in with, "I believe you produced a very good version of *The Birds* last year, Mr. Bale. Felix Urban told me."

"Oh, I—that——"

I had to laugh then. That was very funny. Felix Urban at a performance of *The Birds? Rookery Nook* would have been too subtle for him. "Felix," I pointed out, "is as much capable of understanding the Greek dramatists as I am of following the acrobatics of higher mathematics."

Bale stammered and Robin looked annoyed. I was sorry then and said so. "But he frequently has an instinctive flair. Where it comes from nobody knows. Where it goes to——"

"Is he coming down for the opening?" Bale asked, obviously seeing Felix as his only friend in this nest of scorpions.

"Tomorrow." Robin had recovered himself. "He

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likes to leave us alone for the set-up and dress rehearsal. It's much wiser that way."

"If you need him," I said, "you'll find him at the Villa Bellarosa, Lymington, studying parts with a Windmill blonde called Aurora Fingelstein. They're great on studying parts together."

This was too much for Robin. He said ever so smoothly, "I think we'd better leave Mr. Shepherd to his work. It's tricky measuring up a new stage."

"Don't go," I called. "I can't wait to hear more about *The Birds*."

Dido said, "You don't like people, do you?" She was standing in the prompt corner chewing a thumb-nail.

"I don't like amateurs," I said, "and there are far too many in this company as it is, even though they're being paid for their trouble."

"But not people," she insisted. "You're tied up inside."

"You make me sound like an American play," I said, "all torso and transparencies." She laughed. It wasn't very funny but she was too young to be solemn for long. She posed against the proscenium with her hips stuck out and drawled, "Can I be yer Blanche, big boy?"

George Bale said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting? I was looking for Mr. Moran."

I replied, "Brother, don't mind us. We're just mad about each other. Honey, those hips. Those sultry, goddamned hips. They make me wanna coil up like an index finger," and he blushed and said, "Of course. *Streetcar*."

"Why don't you do that for your boys?" I said,

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but fortunately he didn't hear me. I had an idea I was sounding like a sadistic sergeant from an American war novel. And that was wrong.

The scenery was coming in. Caliban, at the scene-dock, shouted, "The bay window's copped it," and I yelled back, "We're lucky to have it at all." Somebody had broken the lattice. It should have been crated, of course, but that would have cost money. ~~That~~ That would have been unthinkable. That would have deprived Felice Felix of a cigar, a lunch and the services of Miss Aurora Fingelstein for one whole Sunday afternoon. Better by far for Felix, the bright star, to keep his head and spend his cash on cake—"not bread. With apologies to Mr. Pudney, of course.

It was all there though. From floor-cloth (painted stone) to ceiling (neutral, *Someone At The Door*). That was something to be grateful for. Caliban said so. He knew what it was to play in borrowed drapes with the scenery-truck at Crewe.

We started the set-up. The floor-cloth first. For once it was folded correctly. I pointed this out to Caliban and begged him to keep it that way for the rest of the tour. "Cross my heart," he said. "Lord, I obey."

We stretched it, tacked it down and stretched it again. Then the ceiling.

The theatre was filling up. From behind me I could hear shrill squeaks as more of the company arrived. Somebody started calling from the dressing-rooms.

Dust floated in a mist from the flies and Jock asked what lines we wanted. I chose them and they came down smoothly on well-oiled blocks. We flew the

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ceiling (oh, those silver angels) and then found that Electrics had omitted the lead for the hanging lamp. So we dropped it again and he fiddled about until at long last we could take it away, right up into the darkened vault over the stage. Now we were ready.

There is something musty and old even in the newest theatre. It is always dark and the sound falls in patches, leaving whole corners still and brooding. It is like a hulk rocking in a backwater, living its life in another dimension where men have no significance. Once I saw a ship like that. It was still and silent and utterly alone. No man walked the deck, no captain stalked the bridge. Fire had ravaged her from bow to stern and left her a floating derelict on the grey desert of the Atlantic. Not a soul remained. Yet it was alive. We could feel it, Bates and I and the Number One. The certainty was there, creeping up through the soles of our feet and issuing like an electric current from the hair of our heads. I have felt that awareness in a darkened theatre. I have stood on a deserted stage stiff with fright.

Robin said, "Start on the prompt side and work round to the bay window."

Moran said, "You'll never get it all on that way."

Caliban said, "What about the hall at the back?"

Jock said, "You're going to find this rake a bit tricky."

The tour had started. The stage came to life and seemed to lift as a ship lifts as it leaves the confines of the harbour and heads into the wind towards the open sea. Below decks the engines drum into life; 'tween decks the crew shakes itself down; on the

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bridge the Captain settles the wheel amidships and hopes for a good voyage.

I was no Captain and I needed no forecast to assure me it was going to be a disastrous trip. For seven weeks we would sail in uncharted waters, hawking our cargo among indifferent buyers. The crew would be difficult, we lacked a leader and our ship was a leaking tub which groaned and shuddered dangerously at each thud of the sea.

"Up and down stage," shouted Aaron. "What the hell's happened to that flat?"

"We can't bring it more round. We need the space off stage," shouted Robin.

"Take it on and off," said Caliban.

"Scrap it," suggested Jock.

Behind us the land grew smaller and the sea greater. Soon the waves were washing over the last hill. Then it was altogether gone and there was no turning back.

We had got round to the bay window when darling Alex appeared. The set was looking terrible; it was painted a sort of seaweed colour with fake paneling which would not have fooled a myopic cretin. The doorway, left, was more off stage than on and the hall, up stage centre, instead of being a neat recessed oblong, looked like two sides of a rather battered isosceles triangle.

Darling Alex stood in the stalls and said kindly, "I say, old chap, can you tell me where the wardrobe basket is?"

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He was wearing tweeds, a woollen cardigan and a discreetly striped tie indicative of his old Jesuit school perhaps. His hair was short, his chin long. He did his best to ape the Army Officer in Mufti. I cannot say why the act annoyed me. It should have amused me. It was good enough for that.

I said, "Ask Dido. She had it under the stage," and he thanked me, tacitly forgiving me my shortness. He was as courteous as any C.O. on Visitors' Night. He said things like "Would you mind," and "I'm frightfully sorry," and "Do let me know if I can help at all."

Caliban swore. "The pin-hinge is bent."

I said, "I'm frightfully sorry but would you mind not cursing like that? If you need any help just ask me."

When I looked up again, Elizabeth was standing at the footlights. I had not seen her since before the wedding. I called, "Hullo, how's the blushing bride?" and she smiled. When she smiled she made you feel you were the only person who really mattered to her. "Still blushing," she said.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get to the party on Saturday. Felix was throwing a special flap. He had just seen my expenses account."

She laughed. She had that distant, aloof beauty which, according to certain novelists in another, more leisured age, was supposed to drive men mad. Her features were carved rather than modelled in straight, pure lines. Her skin was an unveined marble. Her voice, when she spoke, was light and curiously flat. This was the one strange flaw in her

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beauty and yet such was its quality that it added to, rather than subtracted from her serenity. "I'm looking for Alex," she said now in that particular tone of voice, matt-surfaced, unresonant and I took time off from admiring her to answer.

"He is looking for Dido. You should find them under stage. Can you trust your husband, Miss Rudge?"

She said, "You are always teasing me, Bas."

"That is reputed to show affection."

There was a quality about her which defied analysis: a certain tenseness perhaps, a kind of *close-ness*. It made one think again of marble, cool and white and dangerously brittle. It was something more—or less—than sex-appeal; something greater than self-possession. A hint of inflexibility.

Marble, the sculptor tells us, should be cut with extreme caution. Because of its disastrous tendency to split, careful attrition will bring about better results than hasty chiselling. This was how I felt about Liz. She was not open like Dido or explosive like Audrey. She was *contained* within the rigid confines of her medium, unreachable and quiescent.

She shivered when she looked at the set. "I'm terrified of this dress rehearsal, Bas. I wish it were all over."

I said, "You have nothing to be terrified of. You are not like these actors. It really means nothing to you. With a face like yours nobody with eyes will expect you to act."

She smiled. "You are all so kind. If only I could do just once what Mr. Moran wants."

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I tried to comfort her. I said, "You were signed up because darling Alex was going to marry you. You have never acted before. Nobody expects you to act now. Can't you look upon it as a kind of honeymoon?" She nearly replied and then changed her mind. Looking back now I realize that what seemed comforting at the time, could hardly have been more harmful in the long run.

The dress rehearsal was a shambles. The lights were all wrong, the clothes looked phoney, the acting was execrable. Darling Alex dried five times in the first act, missed two entrances and couldn't be found at all when Aaron decided to run the third act again. When he did appear, Aaron was at his nastiest. "I'm sorry to interrupt your honeymoon, Mr. Ralph, but if you could spare the play five minutes——"

The attack hung over the stage. Darling Alex changed colour and swelled before our eyes. Fortunately Maire St. Clare came to the rescue and diverted Aaron's attention before combustion point was reached.

After Elizabeth's big scene with Audrey in the last scene, even Robin was seen to throw up his hands and mutter, "Why couldn't the man marry an *actress*," which for Robin was quite a condemnation.

On the credit side was Dicky Sharland's first scene with Audrey and his curtain speech at the end of the second act. Generally however it was a shambles. The play had never seemed more banal, more nonsensical.

We broke up just before midnight with a rehearsal called for the next day and an exhortation from

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Aaron to the effect that if we didn't pull our fingers out (wheeze) he'd just refuse to let the curtain go up at all.

Which, as far as I was concerned, was the piece of news I had been waiting all day to hear.

But it did go up. It always does. I don't know who was responsible for that idiotic text "The show must go on", but sometime I should like him to sit through a gross of those ghastly productions on which the curtain should have remained firmly down. Ours was one of those.

The day itself brought me several unexpected but highly satisfactory outbursts. The first was with darling Alex.

I was working on stage with Caliban. We were trying to organize a new system for the scene-change. Jock was changing some lines in the flies and his electricians were wiring up two new floods for the backing right. The stage was in some considerable disorder. Into this walked darling Alex to rehearse, as he put it, a few little scenes with his wife.

"Well, I'm sorry, but you can't come here," I said, "and unless Mr. Moran has given specific permission for the rehearsal I don't think I can allow it."

He went white with fury but said calmly enough, "We'll be doing no harm to anybody, Sebastian. Aaron knows the parts I want to work out with Liz."

I said, "But there's a rehearsal call for twelve-thirty, Mr. Ralph. Can't you wait till then? I don't know if we'll be finished as it is."

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Several of the stage hands nudged each other and Caliban crept closer to hear better.

Darling Alex replied, "Don't try me too far, Sebastian. We've all got our troubles. And Miss Rudge—Mrs. Ralph—needs some extra rehearsing."

She cut in with, "Alex, darling——" and I with, "Look, Mr. Ralph, all that really concerns me is we've got a first night tonight with a shaky cast, a strange crew and a scene-change which nearly pulled the grid out of the theatre last night. And you can't possible have the stage before twelve-thirty."

He stepped forward and for a moment I thought he was going to hit me. Liz held his arms and mumbled something and one of the stage hands started hammering very loudly. Jock commented dourly, "You'll be damned lucky if you have it then."

Alex was trembling. I'd never really seen him in a passion before. His hands were clenching and unclenching. I suppose half the trouble was I'd made him look a fool in front of Liz, and half first-night nerves. Thirdly—if one can have a third half and in the theatre one can (and does) have everything—he was Alexander Ralph which implies an almost neurotic frigidity and only an assumed self-control.

He said, "I won't stand for this kind of treatment, Sebastian, I'm warning you. Stage managers come two-a-penny and I shall make it my business to tell Felix so."

I said, "They also go two-a-penny, Mr. Ralph, and you can tell Felix what you damned well like. You're not getting this stage before I'm ready for you."

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That did it. We had both been longing for a clash of arms for the past fortnight. Not particularly with each other, anybody would have done. The opponent is only a feed, after all, a wall against which one can fling one's mud.

When things had calmed down again Caliban said, "He'll tell Felix, Mr. Shepherd," and Dido cried a little which made us all feel a lot better. Then she dried her eyes and went out to buy three bottles of beer.

The next round took place opposite Richard Sharland. He asked if he could have his mistress backstage during the performance. I said no and he said, "Go on, Bas, let up a bit," and I said, "You're a pro and you should know there are rules to be kept," and he said, "That's rather priggish, dear," and I said, "If one can't be a stage manager without being priggish, I'll have to be priggish," and after that the exchange followed much the same lines as those laid down by darling Alex.

The last encounter and the best (or worst, depending on how you see these things) occurred that evening after the half-hour had been called and while the audience was already filing into the theatre. Darling Alex sent me a message by Caliban to say he'd arranged a bouquet to be handed to Liz over the footlights and that I must be prepared to hold the curtain until she had received it. This I rightly refused to do. It so happened that Aaron had a thing about flowers. "They make the place look a coster's barrow," he said. "The place for flowers is not on any stage of mine." I gave this message to Caliban but

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Alex refused to see it that way. He took it as a sign of further obstinacy on my part. He challenged me in the prompt corner and the altercation was only cut short by the appearance of Robin to say the front-row stalls were listening to every word exchanged and were laying bets on the outcome.

Beginners were called and Felix suddenly materialized at my elbow.

"Thebastian," he said, "you really ough' t' be more careful, you know. Now you haven' much experienth but you come from a grea' family, my boy, a grea' family and I wan' to give you your big chanth. Try an' act more reathonably, eh?"

His hair was falling out and his tummy was sagging wistfully beneath the watch-chain. Nevertheless at that moment I could have killed him.

I went on stage and had a final look round. The spots were on, the overture was ending. I kissed Audrey and she said, "Don't worry, dear. It's all just nerves."

Caliban called, "Music ending," and I said, "Houselights, Jock," in a whisper that stuck in my throat.

Then still trembling with anger, I flicked the switch and watched the curtain rise on the first night

Chapter Two

HOW can one describe a home-coming? One can put down the small details—the tram rattling away from the stop, the church clock striking the quarter—but the larger background of emotion escapes me. It was like, and here one is forced to employ the inevitable simile, it was like the rain-swept sea at evening, the grey amorphous restlessness to which I referred on an earlier page and which flowed over me as I stood with my nose pressed to the glass of the model aeroplane shop. A state of mind which involves all periods of time: the future as well as the past for one not only says, “Here was I yesterday,” but, “Where shall I be tomorrow?” One seems to be, in effect, returning not to the beginning of a straight line but rather to the centre of a circle. Things do not begin and end; they revolve. And the pivot upon which they spin is that place wherein one’s life was begun. Thus in 1953 when I returned to the house in Dolney and heard the clock striking the quarter and watched the tram rattling away to Lighthouse Hill and Nelson’s Point, I felt not a stranger but a wanderer. I was of this place and to it I would always return—if not in body—at least in mind, in my attitude of mind, in my reaction to circumstance and in my general conflict with environment. I was of Dolney as surely as one is of Canberra, Chipping Campden or Sweet Water,

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Texas. And go where I like, I could not avoid this.

It was not a prepossessing prospect. I was standing on Amerson Hill looking down at the sea. Below me the ranks of houses descended in sad, disorderly terraces towards the yachting basin, so that I was presented with a panorama of backsides, tiny walled-in gardens, grimy bathroom windows, sanitary pipes and lines of limp washing. Here and there I could see the people of Dolney—a woman sweeping a backstep, a tradesman's van, a baby crying under a kitchen window, an old man toiling up Perry's Steps.

These things, these small things, assaulted me violently as if the rain-swept sea had suddenly revolted and then left me standing immeasurably alone, melancholy and bewildered.

The child said, "Mum, there's someone at the door," and the mother, "Yes? What do you want?"

I replied that I owned the house and as I was spending a week in S—— I thought of calling on my property to view it. She was unwilling, thinking no doubt of the unswept area and grubby bath, but she invited me in and preceded by the child I went up to the room wherein my boyhood lay.

I was unhappy in the theatre but utterly lost out of it. I had been shuffled into it only through the influence of my family (Kate Osborne was my aunt) but it seemed to me, as I stood in that meagre room with its stained wallpaper and iron bedstead, that I felt some of the influence of my mother, the only daughter of a famous theatrical family to turn her face against the stage and marry a carpet-salesman

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from Bradford. That influence, deep and serene, meant a great deal to me and for a moment a touch of that childhood tranquillity softened me and rendered even the trials of *Storm Thunder* unimportant. I think I would have stood in that room indefinitely had not the child, sucking its thumb and eyeing me vacantly, started a caterwauling which sent me down the stairs and into the Fordham Road again.

I had no intention of raising the rent, I informed its mother, and little hope of ever returning there to live. To which the relieved woman breathed a "Thank you, sir," and then returned to the darkness of the back premises from which she had originally emerged.

I wanted to find a key. That of course is the reason behind all home-comings. One returns for resuscitation, consolation or sanctuary. Fate had brought me back to open the tour in my old home-town and hopefully I set about taking advantage of the fact.

There were no trams going down the hill so I turned my collar up against the wind and let my feet carry me down of their own accord past the Public Library and Baths, the Corn Market and school, the chemist, ships' chandlers and the boats out along Perry's Wharf to Adam's Creek and Shepherd's Cave.

Here we had bathed as boys, naked to the sting of salt and sun, intent only on the pleasures of the hour, the minute, the very second of participation. Here was the place where Adam ruled supreme; it was his creek, his beach, his single rock to do with as he pleased. Here he had made me light his fire

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—more, gather the driftwood—dry his clothes, unknot his line, while lying back he had sung in a cracked voice of treasures and golden galleons and deeds that made the blood run cold. And here was my cave where I could take revenge: make him fetch the bottle of water, the tin of worms, my towel left out to drip. Strict divisions these and always to be honoured even by our friends. Your friends and my friends. Your friends and my slaves. Here Adam had nearly drowned me when the boat capsized and there he had nearly killed himself by slipping from a narrow foothold in the cliff.

They were deserted now these places, singing of a key, a distant key of childhood not of adulthood, deserted, drenched in a winter spray of wind and desolation. But here happiness had been and fastened like the barnacles to the rock, remained immovable.

How can one describe a home-coming? It is more than the sum of all its parts; more, so much more than even the heart can tell. It is memory and prospect, love and utter loneliness. It is all things cherished and buried carefully.

It was only afterwards—after I had looked at my watch and found myself already late for rehearsal, after I had run back along Perry's Wharf and caught a tram and forced myself past the aeroplane shop—that I remembered that Adam had died a sailor's death in the spring of '42.

And that hurt. In that single moment I caught my home-coming. For a second it was there, whole,

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inside me. I knew what I was doing, knew what I had come for, knew it was right I should be there in the first place. Then it faded.

People are born to certain things. They are born to become soldiers, painters, preachers. I was born to the stage. Yet I was not born in a prop basket. My parents were not actors but my mother came of an actor's family and it was through her I could trace my bondage back three generations. And as her blood flowed in my veins so too did the harassing, incessant call of the theatre. And that you can never escape. It is like being born with the germ of some congenital disease except there is no cure. If you are born with the germ of theatre, you will die with it. At the very most all you can do is accept it. Caliban had accepted it; so had Dido; I had not.

That accounted for a lot. It made me what I am. The good side as well as the bad.

It was more than an itch; it tormented me, harassed me, but it also brought me happiness. My whole life had become obsessed with it because it was my life. There was nothing else. There was only the obsession and the hatred for the people who had caused it.

So when I went back to Dolney I wanted to explore my origins, the time when the itch had been lying dormant in my blood. And I found that time when I remembered Adam's death for Adam I had loved and with him had spent the most carefree days of my life; before the interference of Uncle Frank and Aunt Victoria and their long line of ancestral, shuffling mummies.

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It was when I remembered his death I saw how I had changed; how far the obsession had taken me; how drastic would have to be the cure for it. And it showed me also the irony of a situation which had brought me back to open the tour in the very place where I had known him.

Bale was talking about the curtain of Act Two, Scene One. "I'm sorry . . . it's not too quick but too sudden . . . can you see? It's a business of feeling. I don't want to interfere, of course, but I do feel it means so much. Oh, dear, I'm explaining it very badly."

He was. I did not correct him. Do I sound impossibly callous? It was because he was so green, so perfect for the picking. He was God's dividend to people like Felix, unscrupulous managers who suck up blood through the medium of the cheque-book. Was this Bale's fault? you'll ask. Yes, I'd say. The man was a schoolmaster, a producer of amateur dramatics. He should have remained that instead of providing sustenance for people like Urban Tours. They only used him for their own ends, corrupting his pathetic child for purposes of their own.

He was still stumbling on, trying to explain about his "feeling". "You see, when old Samuel brings in the last sheaf of corn—the neck—and hands it to Storm, Storm is touched. It is the first breath of the open air he has had since the accident to his eyes. He says, 'It is kind you are, Samuel . . . kind you are.'

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They are all watching him. It is a moment of great sadness for all of them. The stage is silent and they are all still."

"Curtain," I said.

"Yes, but . . . slower?"

I was surprised. For a moment he had made me see the play. No, not the play—the original idea, the naked inspiration which had provided the play. This is a rare revelation. One is usually so tied up with the mechanics of the piece, the music cues, the lighting cues and effects, that one rarely has time to feel the play. I appreciated this and said, "I see what you mean. I'll try a count of five tonight. Tell me what you think of it," and he was grateful. He said so.

It was little enough but it made me feel like Lord Nuffield. That night when darling Alex complained about the curtain being slow, I took pleasure in holding my tongue. Audrey felt it. She said, "It helps to point the scene," and Dido said, "It changes the whole atmosphere, doesn't it?" Even Caliban noticed it. "It made me feel as if I were playing it to something."

"You need it," I said. "You're worse than a Rada student." He was playing old Samuel, the family retainer. It was obviously the stage manager's part but after one horrified squint at the script, I had persuaded Aaron to pass it to my assistant. "After all, I am a stage manager," I said, "not a music hall feed." Caliban played it in padding and dirty grey whiskers which made him look like John Gielgud in the stills of *Noah*. His main weapon consisted of a

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quavering falsetto which sounded like a choir boy who had got at the communion wine.

"Cut," said Aaron. "That was bloody. Absolutely bloody. Darling, you know I adore you but there are times when I think you have about as much stage sense as a Nonconformist lay preacher."

It was our fourth day of rehearsing in the theatre. The company was flaccid, their efforts ineffectual. The attack of nerves had worn off; now they were left with the meagre script again.

"Six weeks," Aaron wheezed. "You have six weeks in which to make something of this play. At the moment it's like a mess in a stables. But you've got to do something. I don't know what. But you've got to do it. At the end of six weeks you have a date at Golders Green. How Felix managed that we shall never know. But from it may come a West End run—if we find a management that is deaf, blind and mentally deficient. (Where is that blighted author?) So it's up to you." He sighed gustily and thumped about with his stick. "Now I know you can do it. Once or twice I've seen glimpses of it. So there's no excuse, is there? Is there?" He reached for the prompt copy and wheezed unhappily. "Now let us go back. Right back. To your entrance, Liz. And, darling, light of my life, do try and make something of this scene. You're supposed to be a hard cynical bitch in love with Danny. You know he's in love with Rachel. Now you're going to have it out with her. You want to scratch her eyes out but instead you use your tongue. I know it's contrived but the theatre is the Temple of Contrivance. We are con-

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trived. Everything we do or say is phoney, affected, contrived. So accept that as the norm. And punch it. Punch it hard. All right. Go on. Enter Monica."

Audrey was standing up stage. She was wearing a black skirt and a bat-winged sweater. It was almost the way she looked as Rachel, workmanlike, honest-to-God. She kept above the table as Liz came on. "So you haven't left yet, Miss Bourne?"

"Not yet, Rachel, but the time is almost here." It was strange the way her beauty went for nothing on the stage for the simple reason she didn't know how to use it. She was like a schoolgirl at her first dance, standing at the window, her hands clasped before her, trying to look self-assured. I could feel Aaron groaning beside me. "I have twenty minutes still. Twenty minutes, Rachel."

"No, no, no!" he bellowed. It sounded like the cry of a wounded animal. "Darling, my darling, that is supposed to be sinister." He collapsed in a severe attack of apoplectic coughing and came up, spluttering. "You're threatening her, remember? I—have—twenty—minutes—Rachel. Give her something to be frightened of. Oh, my God," he continued in an aside to me, "why do we have to be saddled with a bloody amateur as well! Haven't we enough to worry about?"

"It was darling Alex's idea," I purred, "and Felix was only too glad to save on the salary."

"Well, it's too bad," he sighed petulantly. "Sharland will be wanting us to engage Paulina Overton next."

"What as? Company mistress?"

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He laughed and coughed again. "Go on, go on," he waved at the company and Elizabeth continued the drab recital of words. "Of course the trouble is she's still an unfingered virgin," he went on to me. "How can Felix expect her to play a sexy, man-crazy wench?"

"She's been married nearly a week," I pointed out. "Look at darling Alex. He has eyes like coal-scuttles."

He shrugged. "Perhaps he's the trouble. But anyway I'll put five pounds on it. She's intacta. Doesn't know what desire is."

"What am I supposed to do? Prove it?"

But he had forgotten me. "Now Audrey could play Monica. There's a girl with a body."

"Watch out for Stephen. What would you do with Liz?"

"Drop her." He sighed heavily. "It would make the world of difference."

"Then why don't you? You're the producer," I cried. "We could open in Golders Green with the new cast."

He grunted. "Who'd play Rachel?"

"Dido. She'd be perfect, Aaron. She's utterly wasted in this half-witted servant girl stuff she's doing. For God's sake, why don't you try it?"

"No," he shook his head. "Can't be done."

"But why?"

"Darling Alex wouldn't stand it for one thing."

"Drop him too."

He guffawed. "Love to. But he's got a name and a contract. And the man can act, bad cess to him."

"But the play? Six weeks! We could do it."

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He said firmly, "No."

On stage Audrey had stopped. "Aaron darling, we're utterly wasting our time, my dear, if you're not going to listen to us."

"No time is ever wasted, darling," he replied sententiously, "but you're quite right. Go away, Sebastian, right away. You're upsetting discipline."

It was only after I had given four or five prompts to Liz that my thoughts returned to Aaron's remarks about her. I refused to agree with them but the words had found a chink in my incredulity. It's rubbish, I thought, and yet part of my mind rejected my protestations, saying, "Why should it be? What do we know of one another after all?"

I heard a voice at my side, "She's completely wasted on the stage, isn't she?" and turned to find Stephen Boxer in the darkness.

• "Who? Liz?"

He nodded. "She should be posing for Cecil Beaton. She looks like all the Sargent portraits rolled into one." He waved to Audrey and I said, "Aren't you having a very boring holiday, doctor?"

"Not at all." His tone was measured, polite. He might have been dealing with one of his London patients. "I find it very relaxing."

"Interesting also, I should have thought. They're all megalomaniacs anyway."

"Who? Actors?"

"Yes."

"Indeed?"

There was a pause on stage and I gave a prompt which turned out to be the wrong one. So I presented

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the book to Dido and followed him into the foyer. He was looking at the photographs of the company. I offered him a cigarette and he lit it warily as if suspecting it of psychopathic intentions. He puffed experimentally and having found that it behaved like any other well-adjusted cigarette, he said, "Tell me more, Sebastian, it interests me."

"About actors?"

"Yes. You yourself. You're so very bitter. Why are you on the stage if you hate it so?"

"Inherent masochism," I said. "I come of a long line of actors. More than a line: a museum."

"Sir Frank and Kate Osborne?"

"That's right. But I don't cross myself when I hear their names."

"Audrey told me. I remember seeing his Hamlet. I was only fourteen at the time but it thrilled me. My own state of mind was probably similar." He smiled solemnly as if gently amused at this memory of juvenile complexes.

"He was over sixty when he did that Hamlet," I said, "and a more cantankerous old bastard you couldn't hope to meet."

"Indeed? But he was very good."

"Did you know they were brother and sister?" I broke in. "Most people didn't. The general belief was that they were husband and wife. Certainly they behaved like that."

"I had heard a rumour," he said tactfully.

"There is still a Lady Osborne. She was pushed into the background even during Uncle Frank's lifetime. It is still regarded as bad form to refer to Aunt

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Lettice in the sanctum sanctorum of the family circle."

"Does much remain of the family circle?"

"On Kate's side, yes. A daughter and two grandsons. Uncle Frank had only one boy. A golden-haired lad who ran away from Berkhamsted to be killed in the first World War. There is a plaque to him somewhere with the appropriate quote from Shakespeare. Very touching. Very calculated. Very theatrical. And then, of course, there is Aunt Victoria. Dear Aunt Victoria. She's eighty-one. I'll be seeing her next week. She's the head of the family, the only surviving sister of the Glorious Past."

"With no children?"

"With all of us," I said, "the quick and the dead. Her domain ranges from Bristol to the undiscovered country from whose bourn et cetera. She has twenty-three scrapbooks bound in calf and dedicated to the everlasting glory of the ménage Osborne."

"She sounds frightening."

"She likes to be considered so. Maire dreads her. You've met Maire St. Clare? She plays the old servant woman, Laura." He nodded. "She played with Aunt Kate in the old days," I went on. "Mrs. Page in *The Merry Wives* and Mistress Overdone. She remembers Victoria as a dragon in bombasine with the maternal instinct of a tigress at bay. She flatly refuses to visit her next week."

Stephen smiled. "No wonder your family is so much with you. But you must know your father lost a father; that father lost, lost his."

I said, "Thank you. But the dead never bury the

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dead, Stephen. As a psychiatrist you should know that. It's the living who dig the graves and dig and dig."

"I think they are calling for you," he said. "Elizabeth must have finished her scene. Good luck for next week."

"I have a bet on with Aaron," I replied. "I stand to lose five pounds. I wonder what Aunt Victoria would say if she knew."

"Or darling Alex," he said. "I have long ears, Sebastian."

Aunt Victoria lived in Glastonbury Road. I went to see her two days after we had opened in B—— when Aaron and Robin had returned to London. We had been on the road a week now and the show had not improved at all. Houses were fair and the reception middling fair to bad. We were still nowhere near ready for the outer outskirts of London.

I saw the house as soon as I turned the corner. It was a retired dwelling, set back from the road and emitting an almost tangible atmosphere of South Kensington respectability. Aunt Victoria had moved here soon after the death of Sir Frank and the consequent sale of Arden, the pseudo family seat at Dorking. It had a high front door and a brass bell-pull. Several typed cards indicated the top floors to be inhabited by a Mister Grozeworthy and a Launcelot E. Pemberton, Barrister-at-Law, respectively. These were new and the sight of them saddened me. It must have hurt Aunt Victoria to take in tenants. Then I saw the footscrapper and my spirits revived;

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I had barked my shins against it many a time and it was within the tradition of things that I should aim a surreptitious kick at it now.

Ella opened the door. She was not wearing her ribboned cap but she did address me as Master Sebastian as she led the way past the oak hall-stand with its card tray and up the staircase with its highly polished banister-rail. It was like going to visit a fabulously exclusive specialist. I had that same sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The mistress had not been very well lately, Ella informed me. She was getting on now and hardly went out at all. But her memory was unimpaired and her tongue as sharp as ever. She had not spoken to me on the telephone because she was getting a little hard of hearing now and refused to admit it, even to herself.

She opened the door and ushered me into the first-floor sitting-room. It was of stately proportions and well designed. Long windows reached to the floor on the street side, amply hidden beneath several sets of frilled lace and a faded brocade looped back on golden cords. The carpet was an Aubusson of pale green. The furniture was good and well cared for: a set of ribband-back Georgian chairs, a fruitwood settee covered in *petit-point*, a handsome mahogany bureau, several glass-fronted bookcases and a sort of day-bed from which I presumed Aunt Victoria entertained her more intimate acquaintances, were among the chief items. The pictures were surprisingly modern—there were two Modigliani Nudes for example—but for the most part the

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room had been given over to theatrical photographs and paintings. There were a lot of these, all carefully signed and disposed about the room in strict order of theatrical merit. Thus a reproduction of Uncle Frank-as Lear held pride of place over the fireplace while a daguerreotype of Fanny Elssler had been banished to a dark corner near the music-stand for she had refused to marry Granpapa Osborne, the first Frank of that name, and was consequently held in but slight esteem. My favourite stood on the piano, a group taken at Cowes of Sir Frank posing with King Edward VII. The frame was filled with earnest beards under yachting caps, but in one corner, alone and still, stood my mother, demure in silk with long gloves and a lace parasol. She had often told me of that day. It was her one claim to social distinction.

Aunt Victoria came into the room. There was nothing hesitant in her entrance; she swept in like a Rolls-Royce approaching the baronial steps. "Good day, Sebastian, you're late I think." Her voice was still deep and vibrant—I could imagine her reading "the mercy" speech to advantage—and still possessed the power to remind her listeners of her more famous sister, Kate. She presented a leathery cheek to be kissed and then stood me off. "And thinner too. The tour is going badly." It was not a question. It was a statement of fact, brooking no contradiction. She swept to the windows and adjusted a curtain with a neat jerk of the fingers. "You were always late. Even as a small child."

"I'm sorry, Aunt. I was held up at the theatre."

"Pooh, boy! Who dictates to you? Delegate your

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work to your assistants. You have assistants, I presume." She returned to the settee and sat, regally. "Ring for the sherry now. Ella has it ready. You'll get no cocktails in my house."

I rang and sat near her, tentatively, with my hands on my knees. She smiled. "You are as gauche as any juvenile. I thought all you young people were reputed to be precocious, cosh boys or prostitutes."

I said, "That is the post-war generation," and she snorted heavily. "Every generation is post some war." Then she burst out laughing and I relaxed somewhat. "Tell me about the tour," she said.

When we went in to lunch, she was talking about Kate's Ophelia. "She played it only twice. Once for Frank and once for the Baylis woman at the Old Vic. Both times she reduced the pit to tears. Even the gods were heard to sob. She was the only Ophelia who has ever moved me. So many of the modern ones sound mildly intoxicated. All that maudlin wailing and shouting. But Kate . . . Kate was different." She helped herself to the salad and pushed the bowl to me. "Eat up, boy, they never feed you well in digs. Boiled cod, hah! Times haven't changed. The crises go on, the theatre is always having a slump. Agents still talk like that, do they? Fools, fools, all of them. There is never a slump in the theatre. The audience drops dead but the actors go on for ever." She attacked her cold meat with relish, swallowing each mouthful rapidly, defiantly, standing no nonsense. "Now Kate. Kate was small, like you too thin. Her padding for *Merry Wives* was the heaviest thing you've ever seen. But at times she

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could look like a ballet dancer." She frowned, probably thinking of Fanny Elssler. "Sweetness and light. But even that was an illusion. Did you ever see her Lady Macbeth?"

"Yes," I said humbly.

"No you didn't. Not the real Lady Macbeth. That was before your time. Before your mother married that . . . that carpet-salesman. Before even Orlando was killed." Her eyes seemed to mist but she held her head arrogantly enough. "She was blood and fire. Infirm of purpose!" she glared. "Give me the daggers," and fell to the cold meat again. Ah, Kate, Kate, the silverware cried and in all that hacking and slicing and munching I seemed to hear a familiar echo of the past. "You come of a great family, Sebastian. A family to be proud of."

After lunch we returned to the sitting-room for the sessions with the scrapbooks, the endless reminiscences: "This was Frank as Fleance. He was fifteen. It was his first speaking part . . . and here, here he is as Romeo only three years later. A prodigy, the papers called him, he cannot last. But he did. He outlived them all. And there's Kate as Perdita. Nothing she does or seems but smacks of something greater than herself. She had a great fondness for the part. Nothing would satisfy her but that she must call her daughter Perdita."

"I see her new book has come out—"

"Yes, yes," she muttered impatiently, "and here they are together. Frank and Kate. Orlando and Rosalind. That was before the first World War at the Garrick. Now that would be with . . ." and on

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she went, unconscious of me, totally forgetful that I had endured these sittings three times a year since the age of five, completely unaware of anything that existed outside the pages of the book on her lap. It gave me the feeling of being trapped, or being fettered by these endless recitals. Each session brought its fresh reminder—"You come of a great family, Sebastian. A family to be proud of."

And what did I remember of these people? Nothing but an overbearing, pompous, bad-tempered old man who had patronized my mother, ignored my father and humiliated his wife. Who had wormed his way into the Honours List by discrediting his rivals. Who had ruled his sisters with a rod of sarcasm, compelling Victoria to give up the man she loved (a minor poet) and Kate to retain her family name even after marriage. (Her husband became Commander Osborne-Fisher, R.N.) Who had driven his own son into joining the Army under age and under a false name, because of his heavy-handed treatment of him. A monstrous prodigy indeed who had lived sixty years too long, a vampire blown up with its own conceit. That's what I remembered of Sir Frank.

Of Kate my memories were kinder. I saw a sweet-tempered old lady continually interceding with her brother on my mother's behalf; a loving wife and a gentle parent who had sacrificed home and happiness to the boundless ambition of her brother, and who had died willingly enough, two years after the Hitler war, a widow, a grandmother and a distant, faded name now rarely remembered. Perdita lived at Eastbourne, a writer of children's books. Lance and

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Nicholas, her two sons, had just gone up to school. Their family name was Wigmore. Apart from Aunt Victoria, the name of Osborne was now dead.

And yet I knew there was a great deal to be proud of here. Sitting in that graceful room, I was conscious of a heritage, if not from Sir Frank, from the theatre itself. Kate had found me my first job as Assistant Stage Manager to the Revelation Players and it wasn't her fault that they exploited me handsomely, paying me as an apprentice but allowing me to take over the duties of an artisan. With full responsibility but no authority. I had a special niche in my heart for the Revelation Players. They finished off what Uncle Frank had started. Then the tours, the understudies, the repertory companies and the season at the New with Redgrave. Great days these with the name of Shepherd mounting the name of Osborne at last. To be followed by a slump. Oh, yes, Aunt Victoria, slumps abound in the theatre. Eighteen months of the dole in Chadwick Street and washing dishes for Mr. Lyons; of trailing round the agents and endless cups of coffee at Denham, Waterloo Road and the S.F., Piccadilly. There was background here; all the material in the world for a play or novel. I had it all lined up. Scene: a bed-sitter. Characters: an out of work actor. Time: any time. It was all there, thumping its tail, waiting to be written. I was tired of the people who saw the stage purely as a backdrop to Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud or Noël Coward (with or without his diæresis). The stage was also Magnus, starving in an attic in James Street; Kenneth, writing in his flat

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in Wapping; Marjorie, lunching off a cigarette in the Salisbury, hoping to catch the eye of a bustling producer.

There was a heritage here; not of the Osbornes but of life itself. That I could feel, that I could cherish.

She was saying, "Here he is as Benedick. He wears his faith but as the fashions of his hat. And here as Petruchio . . ."

Inwardly I groaned. There were all the histories to be examined yet before we started on the tragedies. Suddenly I saw a face I knew and hopefully cried, "There's Maire St. Clare," but she was turning the page and reading *The Times'* review of Kate's Portia. I remembered the warning about her encroaching deafness and for a moment felt a twinge of pity. But only for a moment for when she had finished quoting the notice, she commented with no apparent change of tone, "A common woman. She lived off Kate for years." Poor old Mother Mary, I thought. Into the dust-bin with you. The Osbornes have said it and the Osbornes have clapped the lid on't.

I got away eventually by pleading a rehearsal. Even then she made it plain that I was letting down the family name by allowing myself to be called like any other common actor. I offered her tickets for the show but she shook her head as I knew she would. "I never go now. I find there's nothing left to see."

When I left, I looked back. She had already forgotten me; sitting bolt upright against the *petit-point* with her beloved books on her lap, a lonely, archaic relic, lost in her memories but too strong to die.

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"Darling Alex," said Dido, "has been playing up again."

"What's his complaint this time?"

She said, "He wants to know who is going to hold rehearsals now that Aaron has gone back to Town."

She was standing in the wings with her hands in her pockets, pensively pointing a foot. She looked like a study by Degas, lithe as a bow.

"But he knows," I cried. I was filled with rage which was more apprehension than anger. I had no wish to hold the rehearsals. I had anticipated the trouble long ago. Aaron should have held them; Robin should have held them. They were not my baby but they had been left for me.

"I know," Dido said. She bent back pointing her right foot, scowling with the effort.

I said, "Turn the thigh out. You'll never get into Sadler's Wells that way."

"I hate you." She stamped her foot angrily. "You never take anything seriously. You're always putting people's backs up. You're mean and horrible and bitchy and I wish we had anybody in the world as our stage manager but you. Anybody!" I was surprised and hurt to see tears in her eyes.

I said, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Dido. I didn't mean to disappoint you."

She drew herself up. "Not me," she said haughtily. "I hate you." Then she burst into tears and fled.

"She doesn't mean it." Caliban came slowly towards me. His face was in shadow, his eyes troubled. "She's just tired, Mr. Shepherd. It's this damned company, I suppose."

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"No, it's not very happy, is it?"

"It's just the way Felix manages these things. Why should Aaron have to leave us now? Can't the other show wait? And Mr. Stacey. Can't they afford a stage director to a company?"

I could not tell him that Robin Stacey had gone off for an interview at Covent Garden. That was our secret, his and mine, and this company was as full of secrets as a sieve is full of holes.

"That's the way it is." I looked at the notice in my hand. "Before you go will you put this on the board?"

"What is it?" he asked.

"You might see it as the ninety-five theses of Wittenberg. But actually it is only a rehearsal call for the morning. I don't suppose darling Alex will attend."

He didn't. "I left him at the digs," said Elizabeth, troubled. "He was shaving and said he'd meet me for lunch."

"He's a bad boy," Maire announced severely. "He knows he ought to attend a rehearsal call." She click-clicked rapidly with her knitting-needles, adjusting her spectacles at the end of each row. "He ought to be here, Sebastian. I do think you should phone him."

Sharland laughed. He was a glib young man, very actorish, very slick, very charming. "Darling Mother Mary, you don't expect him to give in over the phone, do you? He's probably been in touch with London by now and told Felix just what he thinks of him."

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"It's nothing to what I think of him," she tut-tutted. "He's very, very naughty. I don't know what actors think they're coming to when they behave like this."

Dicky shrugged good-naturedly. "I suppose he's got a grudge, darling. Most of us have." He smoothed his hair with an easy, boyish gesture and smiled. "Will you still be needing us, Sebastian? I'm lunching with Paulina and there are one or two things—"

"You're so keen!" Dido's voice was like a whip-lash. It made us jump, surprised. She was sitting in the prompt corner, holding the book. "Can't you keep away from that . . . that woman for a single moment?"

"Darling Dido." He crossed to her. "I didn't know you cared. Why, this is so blissfully sudden."

"I don't!" she cried shrilly, "but it makes me absolutely sick the way you try and get out of rehearsals when there's so much work to be done. You ought to be backing Sebastian up instead of . . . annoying him. . . ."

This was a surprise for me. I thought she hated me. I said, "But, Dido, I'm not annoyed."

"Then you ought to be." She turned on me like an angry wasp. "Doesn't anybody care what happens to this show? Are we all going to let it go down the drain without trying to stop it? I think it's horrid of you. More than that, I think it's . . . unprofessional. It's our bread and butter and you're just throwing it away." She hesitated unhappily on the verge of tears. "Well, I'm not going to. I believe in this play and I want to get it into the West End even if you don't. It's not as bad as you make out. It's just that

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you are all too horribly lazy and selfish to do anything about it." She tried to glare at us but her lip was trembling and her eyes were brimming over.

Audrey broke the spell. "Darling. Darling, you're so right. I couldn't agree more." She turned to me. "Sebastian, I think we ought to get on with some work, for words if nothing else."

"But darling Alex—?" I said.

"Oh, cut him out. You're his understudy, play it yourself. Or if you want to watch, get somebody to read the part. Stephen . . . or Mr. Bale."

"Me? I—oh—I,"——bleated the author.

"Don't you agree? Of course you do. Caliban, will you clear the stage, please? I think we ought to start with Act Two, Bas, the long scene between Maire and Liz about Storm's blindness. Stephen, can you fetch my spectacles, please, they're in the dressing-room? Dido, will you stay on the book for the moment? Come on, Dicky, Paulina can wait. Mother Mary, put away your knitting now."

"What shall I do, Mr. Shepherd?" Caliban asked, lost.

"Set for Act Two," I said, just as lost. "We may get something out of them while they're still warm."

Maire and Liz opened the scene. We had been going for thirty minutes when darling Alex appeared. The company had been doing fine. We had just finished the scene between Laura and Monica and now Liz and Sharland were together. He was handling her very well. It was an important passage, the one in which the audience realize for the first time how deeply she is attracted to him. At least,

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that's what would have happened with any other actress but Liz. As it turned out, Dicky had to do the work of two. I was fascinated by his skill—until I heard the well-known accents of our leading man.

"I say, Dicky, can you play up a bit? I can't quite hear you from here."

I swung round and found him sitting in the front row of the dress circle.

A stillness fell on the theatre. Everybody was waiting for me to speak. I had to say something. Even Robin would have said something. I said, "I was under the impression, Mr. Ralph, that I was rehearsing the company."

The silence deepened. And lengthened. You could almost feel him weighing it, waiting for just the right moment to say—"I'm sorry to do it this way, Sebastian, but I've just been in touch with Felix. He's given me permission to hold all rehearsals until Aaron gets back."

I thought, It can't be true. Even he could not have gone as far as that. Even darling Alex.

A mumble rose from the company. They sounded more like wolves than actors. I heard Sharland's, "My dear, I think that's a bit thick," and Audrey's, "Really, Alex, you've taken a devil of a lot on yourself." Then there was silence again and I had to say something. It was always left to me to say something. That's why I was a bad stage manager. I always said the wrong thing. This time I said, "Oh, of course in that case I shall leave the company." And then I made a show of leaving the theatre and felt the rehearsal break up behind me.

Chapter Three

GEORGE BALE was saying, "But I don't understand. You didn't *want* to hold rehearsals."

I said, "It sounds phoney but it's a matter of principle. It's my job. There are a lot of things I don't want but they are included in my job. Once they go, I go. I've had it happen before. With a group of little eyases called the Revelation Players. It's a process known as Putting Their Foot On Your Neck. Very interesting. Very painless. In the end you find you've got nothing. No, thank you. If they want a stooge manager they won't find him in me. Shall I tell you a story?"

• "Please."

"Once upon a time when I was working with the aforementioned company, there was a man. A pleasant man, a talented man, but like darling Alex, just a trifle conceited. It was this man's habit to arrive at the theatre any time before the curtain went up. I felt very deeply about this. I had been taught that everybody had to be in by the half-hour. So one night I remonstrated with him. I grappled with his soul, explaining that as I was stage manager I was being held responsible for his presence and the least he could do was to arrive at a reasonable hour as did his fellows. He consigned me to the nether regions and shortly afterwards I was called before the manager. He was very kind, very patient. He gave me to

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understand that I had no right to treat the mumm-ers like that. I was only an apprentice. The next day we had a matinee. We played it one man down. My friend had just forgotten to turn up, that's all. He'd gone to a cinema instead."

"My God," said Bale. "That was retribution."

"Of a kind, yes. But I muffed it. I laughed. Can you imagine it? I thought it very funny. I failed to take advantage of the occurrence and point out to the management what their lack of discipline had brought about. Result: I was given even less authority. In fact, from that time forth I moved rapidly down stage into the position of extra stage hand. Moral: as soon as you feel the foot on your neck, break its ankle."

"And you think this will happen with Felix and Mr. Ralph?"

"It has happened," I said. "The boot descended from the front row of the dress circle this morning."

"I'm very sorry," he said. He toyed miserably with his watercress salad. We were eating at one of Mr. Lyons' emporiums. On all sides of us knives and forks clattered like false teeth, and false teeth like knives and forks. Beside me a spinster with pince-nez nibbled at a roll. She seemed torn between eating it and taking it home and framing it.

"What does it mean to you?" I asked irritably. "As far as you are concerned one stage manager is as good as another."

"I don't think so." He flushed and said, "That's why I followed you. I think . . . I think you're a good stage manager and I'd be sorry to see you go."

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"You're wrong there," I replied. "As a stage manager I'd make a good ship's cook. I have no patience, no understanding, no desire to please. In fact, my sense of co-operation is a miracle: it's completely negative. I get the job done by stamping on the fingers of my opponents. Dido spotted that. Very astute girl, Dido. Very charming, very sweet, very deadly."

"I don't agree," he said.

"But then you know nothing about it. You're a schoolmaster. You should be spending your holidays in the bosom of your family, not loping round the country with a band of players. Take Dido's advice and hate me. Caliban would be a good S.M. in the tradition of Robin. Very smooth, very plausible, utterly efficient."

"You don't like him?"

"You misunderstand me. I adore him. He is everything I long to be. In the main he is in love with theatre. He smells grease-paint and says, Glamour. I smell it and remember unwashed nappies, scrap-book albums and family feuds. Result: one good S.M. and one foul." In point of fact I did not believe this. I knew to be a good stage manager one had to be ruthless. The more ruthless he is, the more the company respects its stage manager. Discipline is as necessary in the theatre as it is in the Army. Lives are not at stake but careers are.

"I can't talk to you," he said, "but I'd be sorry to see you go."

"That's sweet of you, Bale. Now I'll tell you something. I think you're committing suicide by staying with us."

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"I don't understand."

"I don't suppose you do. It's a horrible death. In the end you're left with nothing but twenty-three scrapbooks bound in calf."

"I wish I could help you," he said unhappily, "but I'm out of my depth."

"That's better than being out of pocket," I said. "How much did he soak you for?"

From the look he gave me I knew I was right.

"I have no intention of discussing it," he replied stiffly.

"Pardon my big feet. They just ruin my beautiful friendships," I said.

We sat for a moment in silence and the spinster took the opportunity of slipping the roll into her handbag. She giggled nervously when she saw me looking. "It's for Henry," she explained, forking another tomato ring into her mouth. I nodded knowingly and at that moment spotted Maire St. Clare bearing down on us with a tray of sausage and mash followed a little dubiously by the children. She sat with a clatter, rapidly disposed her purchases about the table, propped a copy of *The Stage* against a bottle of sauce and started popping pieces of sausage into her mouth. "I see the Delaney Twins are playing the Savoy, Clacton, this week," she said chattily. "Such well-behaved children. I knew their mother many years ago. She did an acrobatic-conjuring act. Very effective it was. They called her Bibi. Now I must remember to mark that." She rummaged around in her string bag and ringed the Delaney Twins with a pencil stub like a cattle-hand roping

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a steer. "I shall write and tell them all the news."

"Not all," I said. "Keep some for your other correspondents, Mother Mary." Her letter-writing to the ten thousand other members of the profession was a continual delight to us all.

She regarded me severely over the rims of her spectacles. "We might be legitimate, Sebastian, but there are times when I deeply regret it. I would gladly sacrifice everything for a spot of variety."

This apparently sinister remark, indicative of a promiscuous passion, had the effect of ripping the spinster from her seat and sending her scuttling anxiously in the direction of the nearest exit. Clearly she thought us all lunatics. Maire gazed after her indulgently. "Dear people," she crooned. "Did you notice the way she *clutched* her handbag, Sebastian? A beautiful piece of business. I do hope I can remember that." She frowned fondly, adjusted her spectacles and returned to the Delaney Twins.

Caliban came over to join us. "What do you think Aaron is going to say, Mr. Shepherd, when he hears what happened this morning?"

"He'll be livid," I said cheerfully. "Aaron hates darling Alex the way he hates Chinese lanterns. They both belong to a theatre he doesn't understand." I was amused at the way they had received my resignation. They knew full well I wouldn't leave. Bale however was less sure.

"I'm sure we ought to get in touch with Mr. Urban," he was murmuring. "I'm quite certain he'll want to speak to you, Mr. Shepherd."

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"Oh, I shan't walk out on him immediately," I said. "Not until I've trained this poor slave into the scene-change. And that will take half a tour. How's Dido, Caliban?"

"Repentant," he said. "She thinks she went too far this morning but she won't admit it."

I looked across at her. She was staring loftily before her, her chin lifted, her mouth moving austere through the motions of eating.

"She's making a mistake," I said. "From that one swift kick in the pants great things may emerge."

"Such as?"

"Progress. A little more interest in the show."

It looked as if I were right. That evening the show went much better. Liz only dried once and we finished the scene-change with half a record to go. The second act curtain fell to good applause which was a new thing and even the scene between Liz and Audrey brought forth some response from the rather debilitated audience.

During the last act I was standing in the wings with Caliban. Darling Alex was waiting to go on. I turned to my assistant and said rather loudly, "Of course if you prove to Felix how good you are, he may not send anybody to take my place." Caliban gaped but I noticed that Alex half turned.

"Eh?"

"Just watch your lighting plot and don't forget to check all dressing-rooms when you leave a theatre. And don't wait until you've sent your last load away otherwise you'll be carrying half the show in your suitcase."

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"Yes, yes," said Caliban, "but why——"

"And don't worry about the company. Most of them are pro's. They'll give you a hand in a jam."

"But I don't understand——"

Darling Alex came up, twisting the ring on his finger. He said, "Sebastian, could you spare me a few minutes when we come down? There are one or two things I should like to discuss with you."

I did a haughty Dido. "I'm afraid I'll be terribly busy. I've got the stage to clear and the returns to send off——"

"It will only take a moment," he said, "and I'd like to straighten it out."

Inwardly I grinned. "Well, I'll see," I said grandly and busied myself furiously with old prop sheets.

The upshot was a compromise. "I realize it was high-handed of me," he said, "and I'm sorry." He was sitting at his table removing his make-up. "I should not have broken it to you like that in front of the company. It was just"—and here he picked up his towel and looked at himself in the mirror—"that I haven't been too well lately. Things have been rather ganging up on me." He smiled awkwardly, stiffly, in an attempt at amiability. "I'm sure you understand, Sebastian. Let's forget it, shall we? Don't let's have any further talk of your leaving us. We're in a bit of a lurch as it is. Let's pull together."

It was victory and it made me feel as sick as a dog. The whole affair, when resolved, was so petty.

The theatre is a magnifying-glass. Everything in it is blown up to an impossible degree, distorted,

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hopelessly out of proportion, having no connection with anything that goes on beyond the stage door. We laugh at the worries of the audience and they goggle at the worries we set ourselves. There is no connection; the dividing line is the footlights. To live in the theatre is all right; to live out of it is all right; to live between them, as I did, ridiculing the one and snapping at the other, is all wrong. One cannot have two sets of values. It is hard enough to formulate one.

I said, "That suits me," and managed a smile.

"Good." Slowly he rubbed the towel over his face. As the make-up disappeared I saw the skin pale and taut beneath the towel. "I was talking to Liz before you came in. She said if you're free tomorrow she'd like you to run through some of her scenes with her."

"Liz?"

"Yes." He dropped the towel and looked at it carefully. "I'm doing some work with Audrey and Dicky in the morning. We can come to some agreement about the stage."

I said, "Liz and I can work in the circle bar."

"If that suits you." He picked up his soap and walked across to the basin. His movements were slow; his feet seemed to drag on the floor. There was something intriguing and pathetic in the gesture; and it was a gesture, of that I was certain. Surely Liz could not have suggested it.

I turned. Awkwardly and baffled I said, "I appreciate it. I should like to work with her very much."

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"During one of the rehearsals Aaron called you the villain of the piece. I don't think that's right but Aaron is like that. He's so used to dealing with bad plays he's grown adept at shuffling them round to suit his own standard pattern, i.e. hero, heroine, villain, character juv. and character heavy. You'll notice all his productions are like that. Did you see *Penny On The Moon* or *Deep Side South*?"

Liz shook her head, "No."

"They were both terrible. They are all terrible. Not that Aaron isn't good, he can be damned good. It's just that Felix gets the bad plays and Aaron is his producer. That's why he has developed his own pattern. He has formed his own routine for dealing with bad plays. And when he gets a new one, he merely reduces it to suit the pattern."

"But is *Storm Thunder* such a bad play?" she asked.

"No. If you changed the story, altered the characters and started off with another author, you might—I repeat, might—get quite a good revue sketch out of it. The sort of thing they put on between musical numbers while the star changes her make-up." We lit cigarettes and perched on the bar counter, swinging our legs. "You see, it's been done so often before. There are literally thousands of plays dealing with 'the grim, unrelenting people of Cornwall' and with an inexperienced author like Bale you can't hope to find anything new." I put the phrase in quotes because that was obviously how he saw it. "So when Aaron gets busy and reduces this hackneyed play into a hackneyed pattern we find

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ourselves twice cursed. How dreary can it all become? the audience wants to know."

"So you don't think we stand much chance in London, Bas?"

"Not as we are, darling. Let's face it. We're a second-rate company run by a third-rate management in a fourth-rate play. Does a snowball stand a chance in hell?"

"What I can't understand," she said, puzzling it all out the hard way, "is why people like Audrey, Dicky Sharland, Mother Mary and—and Alex allow themselves to be caught up in it. Surely they're too good for a company like this. And you too," she added hastily.

"There's a solid reason," I said. "There always is. Golders Green. It's the one real date on the tour. West End managements go to Golders Green in search of plays, new talent, what have you. For people who have been out of work for a long time that's a very solid reason. Take Audrey. She was doing very nicely thank you. Stratford, the Oliviers et cetera—then bang. Her luck changed. She did a guest season at Windsor, several try-outs and—nothing else. But if she can catch the eye at Golders Green it'll mean a come-back, a new lease of life."

"And the play?"

"The hell with the play. We're all in this for our own reasons, Liz, nobody is doing it for fun. Well, it happens that Bale has written a play. As a vehicle it's as exciting as a rusty bicycle. But if you can get to the West End on a rusty bicycle, why not ride?"

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"But it sounds so selfish. As if you're just using him."

"We are. Who's bluffing themselves? Felix is using us. He's crammed us on the bandwagon and pushed it off down the hill. Now he's recalled the driver. He knows it will serve our purpose to do some work without Aaron and there's always a chance we may do enough to get us the offer from the West End. Then he'll sit pretty. Raking in the profits for the minimum of outlay."

"God," she shuddered, "no wonder they call it tough."

"Don't be afraid," I said. "You've just had the misfortune to be engaged by a crook for a play by a schizophrenic in company with a lot of other good-hearted but starving wolves. Result: disillusion. Very sickening, very pathetic, very inevitable."

"I don't think I like it." She left the counter and took a walk across to the window. Below her, traffic surged through winter slush. She stood there looking down.

I said, "Did you have anything to do with theatre before you married darling Alex?"

She turned. "No." I thought, How like an angel. God, how beautiful you are. She came towards me slowly and with each step I felt the revelation grow brighter. Her eyes were lowered but she was conscious of my gaze. She said suddenly, "We should start some work."

I said instead, "Tell me your history, Liz."

"My history? I haven't one."

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"Everybody has a history," I said. "Even darling Alex."

"Why do you hate him, Bas?"

I shrugged, "Tell me where you come from, who your parents were, what you did as a child."

"There's so little to tell. We come from Colchester. My father is an Army officer retired. I met Alex at one of his regimental reunions. We fell in love. We were married."

"No romance is so easy," I said. "Were there no ups and downs? No thorny thickets?"

"A few," she smiled ruefully. "But what do you want to hear? My love life or my words?"

I did an Edith Evans, "Both if necessary, I presume."

"Then you'll hear my words."

She was standing quite near me now. I could see the marble smoothness of her skin, could feel the steady gaze of her level grey eyes. I thought, This is bloody silly; I'm falling in love with her. But I don't think I was being fooled even then. Even then I knew that my intentions towards her were strictly dishonourable. But that was no deterrent. On the contrary it was an added talisman, something to be clutched at in wonder. I said—with an effort, "What scene do you want to do?"—"You're the producer. You choose."—"I'm incapable of choosing. They're all the same to me."—"Then the old standby, the third act?"—"If you like. They're all the same to me."

We started. I was conscious of my flat voice, my meaningless intonations. Rachel's words stumbled

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over my tongue. The book in my hands seemed impossibly clumsy—"It looks as if I need the rehearsing," I said.—"Perhaps you do. Shall I start again?"—"If you like. No, no go on. I'll just give you your cue: So you haven't left yet, Miss Bourne?"—"I have twenty minutes, Rachel. Twenty minutes."—"You'll be glad to be gone?"—"Glad? I could scream with relief."—"You don't like us, do you?"—"Who do you mean by 'us', Rachel?"—I hesitated: "I . . . I . . . mean Storm and Samuel and Laura . . ."—"Oh, yes, I like them very much."—"And me?"—"You ought to know the answer to that yourself." She walked to the window. "Shouldn't you?"

Pause.

She stood at the window, saying, "He was all I ever loved. In one month he became my life. Silly, isn't it, Rachel? That in one month you can grow as soft as all that—but I did. And now I pay the price."

"Not you alone, Miss Bourne. Do you think it's any easier for me, knowing I am hated above everything. That I am hated by you—and hated now even by Storm."

She faltered and nearly dried. "I . . . did you . . ."

"Does he know that you sent Danny away——?"

"Does he know that you sent Danny away?"

"He knows but he says nothing." After a while it grew easier. Audrey's voice took over the part. I remembered her little tricks—the rising intonation, the sudden flat fall on "This is his home and he must return even if it is . . . to die." The thought of Liz

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subsided; my heart stopped pounding; I moved easily again.

Liz played up but now she wasn't Liz. She was Monica, the nurse, the brazen intruder summoned by tragedy, bringing tragedy in her wake. "He encouraged me, Rachel, praying that he would forget you. His lips were as cold as ice but they warmed at the mere mention of your name. It was not very nice for me when I loved him as he loved you."

"But it was wrong, wrong."

"Wrong that I should love him?"

"Wrong that he should love me when I am the wife of his brother. That surely is wrong."

She said bitterly, "It is wrong that God should have made us like this. Not wrong of Danny. You are a child about life, Rachel. You know nothing of love and desire." Perhaps unconsciously I had been waiting for it; perhaps unconsciously I had been dreading it. I stopped:

"You did that differently, Liz. Usually you shout it."

"I know. Aaron always says, 'Like a whip-lash,' but I can't seem to do it that way. It seems a sad thing to say."

"You're right," I agreed excitedly. "And that's what I mean about Monica. She's not a deliberate villain. She's a living person not wholly good, not wholly bad. She does feel. She can pity Rachel for her innocence and she can envy her too. Yes, yes, I like that."

"Shall I go on?"

"Yes, of course. You're a child about life, Rachel

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"—you know nothing about love and desire."

"And yet I love my husband, Miss Bourne. And he loved me once . . ."

It all looks so obvious on paper, so carefully rehearsed, so patiently posed. But in that desolate bar with its friendless glasses and harsh counter, I swear it meant nothing to me. It wasn't until much later that Aaron's words returned to me; and the diagnosis he had made.

"Did it sound any better?" she asked.

"Much better. If you can keep it like that—treating her as yourself, not as some third person dreamt up by Aaron—you'll begin to get it. Who would have thought it? Monica Bourne of Colchester, daughter of a retired colonel."

"Does it have to be Colchester, Bas?"

"Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"Only that it's not me. I am not Monica, you know."

"You are in this play, Liz. And that's all that matters."

"No," she said, "it's not all that matters. There are other things which matter more."

I was excited and in a hurry to move on. So I called the second act, starting with Danny's entrance. I looked forward to this. I felt I could respond better in an impersonation of Dicky Sharland.

"When he comes in," I said, "give some reaction. You've been at the farm nearly a month. In that time you have felt his attraction for you. That must be planted right away. Don't waste time being socially polite. Punch your remarks across with a leer,

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Blanche-style: 'Young, young, young man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young Prince out of the Arabian Nights?' Ready? I'll come in here. Laura off. Enter. Good afternoon, Miss Bourne."

It was quite beyond her. Granted the script was as passionate as a fish on a slab, even the thought was beyond her. Dido could make a call to dinner sound like a siren's work-song. So could Audrey. But Liz, no. I began to see there was a lot wrong with Colchester.

"Ooze your way through the lines," I suggested. "You can't overplay it. Has—anyone—ever—told—you—what—a—strange—man—you—are—Mister—Thunder?" I camped my way across the bar like some Mae West in gumboots but she couldn't get it.

"I'm sorry, Bas. I don't even know how to start."

"Don't worry, darling. Just try it your own way then." She did and presented a very reasonable picture of a vicar's wife asking after the sexton's lumbago. But there was more to it than that.

She was trying. That was the thing. She was like somebody copying a Lautrec from a verbal description. She had never seen the original. All her emotions were second-hand. But she was trying. It was only when she dried for the fifth time I saw how hard she had been trying.

"I'm sorry, Bas, can we stop for a cigarette? I feel awful about it."

"Of course." I gave her one and we sat down facing the windows.

"It must be a weakness in me," she said at last. "Something I lack."

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"Experience," I replied. I meant experience in the theatre, but after I had said it I saw the ambiguity. So did she.

"I sometimes feel I ought to leave, you know."

"The company?"

"I don't think I'm giving satisfaction."

"You couldn't fail to." The vice was fastening on me again. I moved my chair around and smoked solidly until she spoke once more.

"I could go home."

"And leave your husband to face the tour alone? Nonsense. Besides you're under contract."

"Contracts can be broken," she said bleakly.

I thought, My God, what is that man doing to her! They hadn't been married a fortnight.

"Don't be silly, Liz. Nothing can be so bad."

She smiled half-ruefully, half-patiently. "Things can be very bad indeed."

"But nobody can blame you," I cried. "You came into this knowing nothing. We all understand. Even Aaron said so." Even Aaron said so? I was growing a little confused as to what we were talking about. "How can you blame yourself?"

"The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves," and I broke in roughly, "Don't use the Bard as an excuse for anything. He was only a playwright."

"And all the men and women merely players?"

"You've been reading too much," I said, "or your English mistress was too persistent. These old saws mean nothing. It's yourself you have to consider, not Shakespeare."

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"Oh, I know, I know." She smiled and took my hand. "Why are you so kind to me, Bas? You're like a cactus with everybody else."

"Am I? Perhaps I like you," I said thickly. "Perhaps I want to help you." The response was all right but the motive was wrong. Yet who could see the motive at this stage? Only myself and I was not prepared to stop. "If you're unhappy, Liz, perhaps I can help you."

"I don't think you can. In what way, Bas?"

"In any way. Just let me try," I cried. "You have no real friends in this company. It's a strange world to you. It's a strange world to me. But I can be a link. Let me try."

She was fighting it in herself. Her serenity had left her. There was bewilderment in her eyes. She tried to draw her hand away. I held on to it. At that moment I could not have stopped for anybody. "Let me try, Liz."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she cried, alarmed. "Let me go, Bas. Alex may come _____"

"Let him come," I said. "You don't give a damn for him, do you, darling? You shouldn't have married him. You know that now, don't you? He's cold and hard. He's got nothing for you. You can't really love him, Liz——"

"But I do," she said. "Don't you understand? That's the trouble."

There was a pause. I answered slowly, "I refuse to believe it. Nobody could love Alex. Least of all you."

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She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know."

"Liz, darling, listen to me." I knelt beside her chair. "This is probably very wrong. At this very moment I can see the Recording Angel lifting his hand to his eyes in horror. But he doesn't know how I feel about you. Nobody does. Liz, darling, can't you see what I'm trying to say?"

She hesitated, "Please, Bas, don't say any more. I don't think I could stand it. I feel so afraid."

"Afraid?"

There was a movement in the mirror behind the bar and Caliban said, "Mr. Ralph wants to know if Miss Rudge is ready for lunch."

I looked up at her. She said, "Yes, I'm ready," in a whisper.

There was nothing more to be said. I stood up and tried not to look a fool as I brushed off my trousers. The prompt script was lying on the counter. I picked it up and said awkwardly, "Well, we'd better end there, hadn't we?"

She looked at me, but this time even the whisper didn't come.

The train left Central at nine-ten. I found myself in a compartment with Bale and Caliban. The others were next door. Audrey and Dicky were motoring up.

"As far as I can remember," I said, "the stage of the King's is very small. We had to cut the set there last time."

"Will that alter the action?" Bale asked.

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"Possibly. We'll have to strike the chest and put the cartridges for the shot-gun in the table-drawer, up left."

Caliban looked up from his Penguin. "Will Aaron be back this week?" He was marking the place with his finger. I could see the ring Dido had given him for his birthday.

"Probably. I don't know. Why?"

"I just asked. I think we need him. Don't you?"

The train was gathering speed. Goods yards and tenements were flashing past the windows. Machine-guns broke out as we clattered over points. I saw a streak of green, some stunted trees, an advertisement for Oxo. There was a shriek and an engine flung itself past us. The lights flickered. We plunged into a tunnel. I said, "It would certainly be a relief."

I wanted to cry out, "Don't misjudge me, Caliban," but Bale was watching me and the carriage was full of shadows and noise. I stubbed out the cigarette and picked up my book.

When we emerged from the tunnel I found we had reached open country.

Chapter Four

IN L—— Bale and I shared digs. It was a small room with two beds, a wicker table, a grass chair and a wardrobe with the doorknob missing. It overlooked a council school. At five o'clock I stood at the window and watched the rain hissing down on the asphalt playground, the bicycle sheds, the out-houses. Everything glistened like polished ebony. The air was still and opaque. Soon my breath frosted the glass. The rain went on. In a little while it was dark.

Bale was writing a letter. He looked stiff and awkward sitting at the wicker table. His legs were too long, his movements too cramped. I said, "You ought to be taking prep now," and he replied, "Oh, not yet. Term doesn't start for another week." He sucked at his pipe, felt for his matches, relit it.

I said, "Might as well be hung for a sheep," and turned the gas-fire on full. It popped and fizzed and gave out a little extra warmth. I warmed my hands. "Adding to clouds more clouds with his long sighs."

"*Romeo and Juliet*," he remarked without looking up. "Act One, Scene One, and it's 'deep sighs'."

"You're better at it than Caliban."

"I like him," he said. "What have you done to offend him?"

"Oh, the world is divided into two parts: those

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who say, 'Why do you hate theatre?' and the others who ask, 'What have you done to offend him?' The answer to both is nothing. Sweet nothing. I never did offend him i' my life."

"He seemed very miserable at the theatre today."

"Set-ups are miserable affairs. You've been with us three weeks. You should at least have learnt that."

He smiled but said nothing. You're gaining confidence, I thought. In another few weeks you'll be telling me what to do. Hell, what a life; everybody wants to get in the act. As far as I'm concerned, they're welcome to it. Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub and you can't keep a good usher down. "Who you writing to, scrivener? Your wife?"

"My wife?" He frowned. "No, actually it's one of the boys at school." He went on writing quickly in his neat, scholarly hand. *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*. It was a Latin master's hand, efficient, compact, rapid; the thoughts preceding it by a long way, conjugating and rearranging. I could see him writing at the blackboard, *Veritas omnia vincit*, and standing back happily; Truth conquers all, sure of his syntax, certain of its meaning. But where is truth, magister, and should we recognize it if we saw it? Do we stand any chance of finding it in Sir Frank or *Storm Thunder*; in disappointing our assistants or seducing the wives of our leading men? No, no, *experto crede*, for I have tried these things.

He finished writing and sat back with a sigh.

"A special boy?"

"No. A member of the school dramatic club. He made me promise to pass on all the news."

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"The news of what, maestro? The rain, the digs, the British Railways?"

"The tour." He flushed. "They're all very interested. Sounds silly, I suppose."

"Not at all. Keep your eye on the ball, Bloggs Minor, and play it with a straight bat."

"Actually he's a very nice lad. He played Peisthetærus in *The Birds*. I think he ought to go a long way."

"He should with a name like that."

We sat for a while in silence. I wanted to talk about Liz but that, of course, was out of the question. One does not refer to these things in public so I sat listening to the rain and thinking of the circle bar, dreaming of what might have happened had Caliban not interrupted us.

After this pause he said carefully, "Why don't you write, Sebastian?"

"Me? Ha, not bloody likely."

"But why not? I'm sure you'd do it very well."

"I know too much about it," I replied. "I'm the executioner's assistant. I've held the axe at too many first nights to be thrilled by the glamour of the pen."

"But I should have thought that an advantage," he persisted. "You do know the theatre, don't you? I mean, you wouldn't make the same mistakes as I have, for example."

"I doubt if that would comfort me, magister. These noisome weeds that without profit suck the soil's fertility from wholesome flowers."

He stammered, "You're certainly frank."

"I'm sorry. That was going too far even for me."

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"No, don't apologize. You'll spoil it."

I wondered and he saw my look. "You see," he went on, "I admire your frankness even though it's pretty brutal at times. I suppose as a schoolmaster I'm used to the well-ordered world. The staff are just icily bad-tempered, the boys just insolent. Your type of redolent frankness is new to me."

"And to me," I said. "It's redolent of intolerance, impatience and boredom."

"No, I don't think so." He smiled. "Before you say something bitter again, may I say that I wish I were more like you."

"My God," I was aghast. "You must be mad, magister. My act has nothing for you. Behave like this at school and you'll be given your cards."

"But it's honest and direct," he said. He leant across the table excitedly. "That's what I mean. I suppose it sounds silly to hear me talk like this. You look upon yourself as a cynic but like all cynics you can't bear cynicism. You pull everything down and hate yourself when you've done it. But there is a spirit of attack. That's why I think you ought to write a play. It might be brutal but I think it ought to be worth reading."

"That's very good of you," I said dryly.

"Now do I sound patronizing? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything." He went back to his letter, painfully self-conscious. His pen shook slightly as he went through the pages correcting. I imagined Bloggs Minor receiving it: "I say, you chaps, here's a letter from old Hayseed all about that beastly play of his."

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"Do I figure in it at all?" I asked.

"In what?" His tone was stilted, rather withdrawn.

"The epistle according to George Bale."

"In a way. I was telling the boys about the set-up today."

"Ye Gods, you fellows, the stage was so small, not half the size of the rostrum in the science lab. But Mr. Shepherd—he's our stage manager, you know—didn't turn a hair. He merely added a few packing-cases to the front of the footlights and covered them in muslin and within a few minutes we had a stage big enough for a whole production of *The Gang Show*. Don't be kind to me, Bale. I'm not one of your blasted fourth-formers who has to be humoured and encouraged. You haven't found me weeping behind the gym or scribbling Greek odes in the Physics lesson. I'm a grown man, God help me, and what I am I am and I don't like it any more than anybody else. But don't be kind to me. Don't flatter me by saying you like the act. I'm not taken in by it and neither is anybody else. It may not be the sort of thing you find in your cloisters but that's no reason why you should admire it. Good God, man, is this your first taste of the world!"

He sat deathly still, his face pale, his eyes looking straight ahead. He might have been one of his own boys caught out at some schoolboy crime.

"Oh, blast you. I'm sorry. Blast it all. Blast this rain and blast this tour. There must be some sunshine in something."

"There is," he said, still without looking at me. "In writing, for one thing."

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"Hell, don't send me up with that ruddy play of yours! Not again! You've heard what I think. Do I have to say it all over again! You admit you know nothing about the theatre. What you know about plays you've learnt from reading them with your boys. Well and good. But leave me alone, I beg of you. I have been connected with the stage all my life and the smell of grease-paint is as familiar to me as the smell of locker-rooms is to you. Don't send me up with stories of your writing and with little messages of hope gleaned from your first three weeks on tour. There is your world"—I stabbed my finger at the teeming darkness where the asphalt playground lay—"and this is mine. They have nothing in common and all your good intentions won't ever bring them together. Now let's leave it at that."

"I'm sorry. If you like."

"I like. Your views are very interesting, very touching, but irrelevant. Save them for your next play."

I woke up next morning with a splitting headache. The playground was filled with little boys and girls playing hopscotch and tag and other shouting games. My thoughts on schoolteachers were particularly bitter. We were lighting at ten and had a run-through for moves at one-thirty.

Bale had gone. His bed had not been slept in. I went down to the theatre prepared to do murder.

The company dribbled on to the stage like so many convicts, muttering, "It's not really going to be like this, is it?"

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The stage was minute. The set was canted over at an angle which took the hall off centre and brought the bay window within reach of the front-row stalls. The backing behind the door, prompt side, did not exist; an exit revealed inches of raw brick and the edge of the ladder crawling up to the flies. It looked as much like a Cornish kitchen as Knightsbridge Barracks.

Sharland was the first to pick holes. He wanted to know how he was going to cross down stage of Audrey when he moved to the bay window. "That's what we are going to find out," I said. "That's what this rehearsal is for." Mother Mary was not convinced either. "Surely if you had pushed it all round the other way, Bas . . ." Caliban started testing the panatrope for volume and Dido announced that she had lost Audrey's belt for Act One. I called beginners and we struggled miserably through the first act.

At three o'clock Liz burst into tears and when Audrey advised a short break, darling Alex snarled, "She'll have to get used to it sooner or later and it had better be sooner." This was the lowest point of the tour and it felt like the end.

I cannot analyse my feelings for Liz at this stage. I felt a sympathy for her and a desire, but mixed with this latter was also a curious antagonism. Like Bale she was a foreigner. He was a schoolmaster, she a house-wife. They had no place in the theatre and in a crisis merely pushed themselves in the way. As people I felt sorry for them, but as professionals I could have flayed them. So when Alex snapped at

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her, my attitude was, "For heaven's sake make up your mind one way or the other, but let's get on," a response which brought me a glare from Audrey and a look of surprise from Caliban. Liz herself seemed beyond even that. She looked utterly exhausted. The fine cheek-bones were more prominent, the modelling of the brows more forceful. Her eyes were drained of colour and she moved limply, dragging one foot after the other which reminded me of Alex's movements in his dressing-room, the night of the compromise. These things, however, I noted less than subconsciously. They were the dabs of colour in an impressionist painting. At the time I was aware only of the general effect and the overall picture of the company, halted in mid-scene, encrusted with light on a stage heavily shadowed, with Liz and Audrey at one end and darling Alex at the other. Probably responsible for this was my own fatigue, for I remember nothing of what happened next nor whether in fact Elizabeth ever finished the scene. For the next peak in my memory is the reappearance of George Bale.

I had given him not a thought that morning—apart from my first surprise at finding his bed undisturbed—and his sudden entry brought me some forgotten pangs of conscience for my treatment of him the night before. But not for long.

He came straight up to me and announced very loudly in a strained, high-pitched voice, "I've written some new dialogue for Act Three which I think you ought to use tonight."

I gaped at him. This was a new George Bale. I

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imagined he had been drinking. "New dialogue? What do we want with that?"

"My contract," he said belligerently. He *had* been drinking, "my contract distinctly allows me to revise the play on tour."

"Oh, my God." I smacked my head into my hands and waited for the roof to fall. "*Now* you think of it, when we've spent nearly six weeks working on the old version. Now you bring us new dialogue! Why don't you bring us a new play with a new set and company of players? I'm sure you're quite capable of it. Wait, wait, wait," I called to the cast, "Mr. Bale has some wonderfully thrilling news for you all."

I left my seat and wandered to the back of the theatre. We had three hours left before the curtain rose. There was the inset to be lit and two more scenes to be rehearsed. Certainly we could not do the revisions today. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the day after.

Bale was saying, "There's not very much, you know. A new speech for Miss Waring and another scene between Alex Ralph and Miss Rudge." He looked terrible. I don't know how he had spent the night; walking, perhaps. His clothes were damp, his raincoat splashed with mud. Water had flattened the hair on his scalp into a tight-fitting cap. His beaky nose was blue with cold. He seemed to be pleading with the company with his hands held entreatingly before him; it was only when I approached I saw they were clasping a threepenny exercise-book, dog-eared and torn.

Mother Mary replied gently, "I'm sure they are

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very good, dear Mr. Bale, but perhaps it is a little late in the day if you want us to do them tonight," and Audrèy said, "I think so, you know. We haven't much time left."—"That's right but don't you worry, old chap. You bring them along tomorrow and we'll give them a try then." That was darling Alex. "Quite sure they're excellent, of course."

"But you don't understand," Bale persisted. "I don't think they are excellent. I don't even know if they're good. But if you would let me try them it would give me some idea of what's needed."

"I think he's right," said Dido. "Perhaps you could read them to us now."

"Well, I'm not awfully good at reading but if you think——"

"Sebastian," announced darling Alex coldly, "I do think we ought to get on, you know."

"I couldn't agree more," I replied. "I'm just waiting for this intrusion to end."

"But it's important!" Bale came across to me. "Surely you see that, Sebastian. You were saying last night——" He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. "But I've got to see it. It may make all the difference. This new scene between Storm and Monica helps to build up the final curtain. I've cut two pages out before that but with the extra stuff——"

"Listen, Bale, it's all very interesting. You've persuaded me it's a sodding masterpiece but look at the blasted time." I took him by the arm and propelled him towards the pass-door. "We'll discuss it after the show tonight. Now for God's sake get out and let us work."

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He went. His opinion of us was quite obvious.

To the layman another unimportant scene. But apply the magnifying-glass of the theatre and see the stresses: the fatigue, the perpetual worry of bad houses, the local antagonisms, the poor play, the continual struggle for power in a company lacking a leader, and above all, the dread of making a bigger hash at something new than we had already made at something-familiar.

At six o'clock the company went off for a cup of tea and Caliban and I started putting up the inset. This used only the down-stage half of the living-room; it was the living-room with a false wall cutting off the hall and heavy drapes hiding the bay window. As a rule it was an easy change: on this postage-stamp it was hell. We had to "break" the set in the middle to bring the new flats through. Caliban was hanging on to it while I went in search of screw-eyes. He called, "They're in the toolbox by the footlights."

In the toolbox I found packets of size, some clouts and Audrey's belt for Act One. I was wondering what this last was doing there when I heard Caliban's shout. "Oh, Mr. Shepherd, help quickly, quickly!" and I looked up to find the whole back wall of the set coming towards me. I started to run, "Hold it, Caliban, I'm coming," but it was too late.

It fell slowly, peeling off all the way round. There was a crunch from one door and the sound of splintering wood as the battens tore loose. I made a dive for one corner and managed to catch it before it hit the furniture but one flat ripped itself free and

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fell across the footlights. There was a ghastly tearing noise and a corner of the toolbox appeared through the canvas.

Followed a hideous silence. Dust floated from the stage-cloth and flies. One of the light-battens was swaying gently. The stage looked as if it had barely survived a storm at sea.

Caliban was shaking. His face was the colour of unripe apples. He looked at me appalled.

I said, "What do you expect me to say? I could split your head open with a mallet."

He whispered, "I know. I'm sorry, Mr. Shepherd."

"So are we all. But how is that going to help? I could tear my heart open but that won't put the set up again. Oh, no, only hard work will do that. Now we start from the beginning. We go right back to yesterday afternoon."

"It slipped," he gulped, "I'm terribly sorry," and then his voice seemed to fail altogether.

"Exactly. And the curtain goes up in one hour and ten minutes."

As it happened we were ready in time. We worked like paranoiacs, patching, sawing and hammering, but we need not have worried. Darling Alex decided to keep the curtain waiting ten minutes because he objected to the light in his dressing-room and refused to make up until the electrician had strung an extra lead into the room.

The next morning the atmosphere persisted. I found Dido weeping in the prop-room. I said,

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"This is becoming a pernicious habit, a regular fount of tears. Blubbering and weeping, weeping and blubbering."

She flung an angry glance in my direction. "Oh, go away, Sebastian, you're the last person I want to see."

"Then don't look. Bury your face in that puce cushion and I'll stay here as quiet as a mouse. There is only one place in the theatre where weeping should be done and that is the prop-room, surrounded by goblets and daggers and old parchment documents. These but the trappings and the suits of woe."

The weeping continued. She was like a child, racked with sobbing.

"But still she says nothing but weeps and weeps and now falls on her bed, and then starts up, and Tybalt cries."

"Oh, Sebastian, you are a nuisance." She tried to control herself, blew her nose, regarded me miserably. "Why don't you go away when a girl asks you? There is nothing worse than crying when somebody's looking on."

"Then don't cry," I said, being the eternal male.

"But I want to!" She stamped her foot angrily and fresh tears sprang to her eyes. "You're awful. You get worse and worse every day. I hate you . . . oh . . ."

"I do wish you'd shut up," I replied nervously. "Caliban is just outside and any moment now he's going to rush in and do a big Laertes thing, to cut my throat i' the church."

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She giggled and hiccuped loudly. "Now see what you've done. It's all very well getting romantic about a beastly prop-room but if you're not going to let people cry there, why say it?"

"It's a way to stop them weeping," I said. "You stand and stand and stare and make them feel how terrible they look. It's a sort of ocular rudeness. All really first-class stage managers use it. Now dry your tears and tell your Uncle Bas all about it."

"I can't," she answered. "It's a solemn pact."

"With whom? Caliban? Is he to drop the set again tonight? E'en so. Better indeed than having us all drowned in tears."

She dried her eyes on a large blue handkerchief—Caliban's—and poked it into the pocket of her jeans—Caliban's again. "Tell me," I asked seriously, "have you really no clothes of your own? Your brother tells me you even wear his Y-fronts."

"Well, I do all his washing," she responded indignantly, "so I don't see why I shouldn't use them. And they're just my size also."

"What an extraordinary couple you are. But I adore you. Except when he smashes my set and you wet all my props. Now let us slide out of the stage door and sneak a cup of coffee."

"But the rehearsal—?"

"Will be late. Bale was still typing when I left the digs. The revisions have now grown into two new scenes and thirty-odd pages. We'll get a new play out of him yet."

"I'm not sure I want a new one," she said. "The results of this one have been bad enough."

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In the snack bar I found a throw-away on the counter. It was advertising a certain play, *Storm Thunder*, at the King's, starring an Alekander Relph. I showed it to Dido. "He will be pleased. That's enough to keep the curtain waiting twenty minutes tonight."

We ordered coffee and doughnuts and perched on the stools, dangling our legs. Dido looked like a refugee swamped in blankets. Her nose was glossy, her hair like a hedge. Her lumber-jacket was stained with oil: Caliban was still at the motor-cycling stage. She said, stiff with resentment, "I'm not going to tell you anything so you needn't ask."

"That means you're just bursting to tell me. I'd forgotten all about it."

"Well, I haven't." She munched at the doughnut, cleaning herself after each mouthful with the back of her hand. "He was awful."

"You ought to be used to that by now," I asserted. "Breathed there a man with soul so dead who never to himself hath said——"

"But it was the way he said it," she insisted. "So casually, as if it meant *nothing* to him. I couldn't believe my ears."

"You ought to have clocked him one. I presume you are referring to an indelicate suggestion. What did he say?" I fished in my coffee for a piece of doughnut which had just gone down for the third time. " 'Miss Lambert, I am a man and you are a woman and I wish to establish this basic truth on a nuptial foundation?'"

"Oh, no. Much more, 'Darling Dido, you're my

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blissest thing. Why don't you come home with me one night?" "

"Doesn't sound at all like darling Alex," I said. "He's so straight-laced. Was he drunk?" I stared back at the attendant who was gazing at us open-mouthed. "Pornographic muck, scribbling on lavatory walls," I announced severely. She ducked in horror. "Stocking tops!"

"But it wasn't darling Alex," Dido was wailing. "It was Dicky Sharland."

"Dicky Sharland? But, darling Dido, you know he's the biggest lecher this side of the Eiffel Tower, sleeping with man, woman or dog whichever is the nearest. What are you so upset about?"

She pouted. "You don't have to be so flattering about it. And I was upset. Very upset indeed."

"I can't understand you," I said cheerfully. "You've been on the stage since Irving was a boy and lived the most indiscriminate kind of life—look at that Uncle Dan you told me about—and yet you allow yourself to crawl up the wall at the first indecent remark from a young ram like Sharland. You're mad, darling. Somebody ought to tell you that's out of character. Have some more coffee."

Her eyes flashed bad-temperedly. "I might have known I'd get no sympathy from you. Caliban would have killed him."

"Caliban would have dropped something," I said, "or tripped over his own feet first. You know our slave. Now sup up and have some fresh."

She refused to see my point of view. "I don't

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know why you're taking his side in this. He's an awful man. He's got no principles and he's lazy and he's immoral."

"Get you," I cried. "Who's talking about immorality! What about Uncle Dan?"

"Oh, Sebastian!" She looked as if she were going to throw the remains of the doughnut at me. "You're infuriating. You're even worse than he is. That's probably why you're sticking up for him. You *men*!"

"Not worse, darling," I said, "not worse." Had Caliban told her about the scene in the circle bar? "But animal all the way through. Sex in dark corners." The attendant gave a little shiver and went on cutting ham sandwiches.

Dido started to sulk. Her eyes grew mutinous, her face took on its flat Mongolian expression. "Now I know why I love my brother," she said firmly. "He's not like other men."

"Poor Caliban," I sympathized. "But that shouldn't worry him in the theatre. So few of us are. We're used to it. And by all reports Sharland shops in that market also."

She left in a rage but returned after a few minutes to give me the money for her doughnut. "For I never take charity," she declared austere.

"Hoity-toity. Lavatory pans to you."

We strolled back to the theatre. A maroon Rolls was parked outside the stage door. I pointed it out to Dido. "There you are, saved. Rescued by Rover or The Arrival of The Sexy Red Herring. Paulina has come to tea."

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"She can go jump in the lake also," she declared rudely.

We found her on stage, plaguing the soul out of the house manager. When she saw us she gave a little shriek and came across on tripping high heels with arms wide open. "Darlings, darlings, darlings, there you are at last! What bliss to see you again. Utter blissikins." She kissed us loudly and hugged me very firmly. She was an old friend. Her bosom smelled strongly of whalebone and Paris; the Rue de Rivoli of course. She was wearing an elegant barathea suit with a blue mink stole, a velvet hat and gold shoes with openwork heels. A diamond bracelet decorated one glove, a rope of pearls lay at her throat. She looked wonderful until you saw her close to. Then you realized how little she was wearing and how much she ought to have worn. Her face was exquisitely made up, but raddled. Definitely raddled. I was very fond of her.

"Now, Bastien, you glorious thing, you must tell me all the news. I've been away for ages, simply ages. How is the tour going?"

"The tour or darling Dicky?" I quipped.

"You are naughty," she simpered archly. "You simply *wrap* me up. You know exactly what I mean."

"Then Dicky is very well," I answered. "By all reports in bouncing form." I did not mention the invitation to Dido. I didn't think she would appreciate it. She was apprehensive enough of Dicky as it was. Some called her a nymphomaniac, I thought she was just a very sick woman. She was as promiscuous as Sharland but as faithful as Dido, for to

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each affair she brought servility as well as her endless store of wealth. Her gaiety was as false as a wooden shilling. She had learnt to distrust the world, her friends, even her lovers. Everything seemed to threaten her with impermanence. She was like an angler, desperately casting her line in all directions and never hooking the catch she sought. I remember the first time I met her. It was at a party of Aaron's. She had already had too much to drink and when she cornered me I was just on the point of leaving. "You were in the Navy, weren't you, Bas? I like sailors. I often wonder how they manage during all those months . . . of course, one hears stories but from what I've seen—— God, aren't there already enough of that type? You look shocked, Bas. Have I shocked you? You're sweet. I like you. I wish you'd come and see me. I bet"—with a terrific effort—"I bet they taught you a thing or two in the Navy. We'd have a good time."

"But your husband, Paulina, and Dicky?"

"Dicky doesn't love me, Bas, not the way you would. And you do like me a little, don't you, Bas? Say you do. Just a little."

The next day she was gay and brittle and sober. She talked about the play, her parties, Paris. She never left Sharland's side. Her remarks were witty, her perception keen but the thought was there. One could see it behind the eye-shadow, hear it behind the laughter. The lurking threat of impermanence, the never-ending search for the one, the real one, she needed.

Even now, as she walked me across the stage,

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chattering of Hughie, Charles and Philippe, her eyes were never still. Every corner had to be searched, every remark scrutinized. In the shadows might lurk her threat, in the light might stand her ideal. The putting up and the pulling down. The set-up and the strike.

When the company arrived, we both noticed Sharland's sudden annoyance, the almost imperceptible hesitation before he came across to her. "Paulie darling, how wonderful you look. How blissful to see you." She took his hands and kissed him and laughed and wrinkled up her eyes but all the time the thought was there. It was always there. It never left her: How beautiful he is; how long can it last.

And then I had time to observe no more for Bale arrived, breathless but shy, with a sheaf of new sides and it was time to start the rehearsal.

The revisions were surprisingly good. Not good enough but they did make a difference. The most effective was the new scene between Storm and Rachel just before the final curtain. It helped to elucidate the character of the child-wife who, loving her husband with the passion of a woman, still cannot understand the love his brother bears her. "Is it true, Danny, that you love me not as a sister but as a woman?"—"It is true all right."—"You swine."—"Yes, I am, aren't I? I think of all God's creatures, Rachel, I have sunk the lowest."—"You could do this to Storm, blinded, your brother. I hate you. I hate you with a strength that cannot be mine alone."

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In this scene Audrey and Sharland were almost good. One forgot the banality of the script, the flagrant miscasting. In the new scene even darling Alex made his weight felt as Rachel realizes that her own life is to pay for Danny's departure. "Gwillen, would you be taking me for a little walk now?"—"A walk, Storm?"—"It is such a long time since I walked the cliffs and felt the sea breeze on my face . . ."—"The cliffs? Must we go to the cliffs?"

We rehearsed for the rest of the week and by the Saturday night the curtain was falling to some sort of suspense. Even Caliban's hoarse off-stage cry as Samuel, produced a shiver in some of us, as he stood near the dressing-rooms calling, "Mr. Storm, Mr. Storm . . . we have found Miss Rachel at last." I took a distinct count of four before I flicked the switch and as the curtain slid down one could feel the sympathetic tremor in the audience.

The get-out that night was a happy affair. We started striking the set before the cast had reached their dressing-rooms. We were pleased to see it come down; shrunken, badly fitting, patched after the calamity on Monday. We struck the ceiling, tied down the lines and stacked the flats ready for the trucks.

It was then Caliban came up with a list in his hand. His face was unwashed. Wisps of crêpe hair still clung to his chin. He looked like Rip van Winkle. "I've got the company addresses for next week, Mr. Shepherd. I think you may be interested."

I took the list and glanced through it idly. His words hadn't struck any chord in my consciousness

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at all. I had been too caught up in the play to be worried about addresses.

There were the usual hotels, boarding houses and digs. Sharland was at the Grand, probably with Paulina. Audrey was going to a Mrs. Winter. Darling Alex had booked at the Midland. Mother Mary was at the Red Lion. Liz was going to the Arden. And then I saw what he meant. I wondered if she had blushed when she had told Caliban. It brought back memories of the circle bar and me on my knees swearing eternal love.

It was only that darling Alex and Liz were no longer sharing the same address.

Chapter Five

I DO not think I shall ever forget the week in IB—. So much happened there. It was the turning-point, not only of the tour, but of a lot of other things in my life as well. It will always retain a special significance in my life. Not that there was anything remarkable in the town itself; it was the usual industrial city of the North where the soot and grime are as slimy as fog and where the winter sun hangs like a street lamp even at midday. Nor was the theatre out of the ordinary. The stage was large—if anything too large—but they had good lights, even a special set of circle spots, and the dressing-rooms were clean.

We moved in on the Sunday afternoon and were set up by midday the next day. The booking was fair; the first night good. After the performance Bale and I returned to our digs. This was his last week before returning to school. I was worn out, but he was in a talkative mood.

“Do you know, Bas, I think this tour has taught me a lot. I’m learning the hard way but I am learning.” He removed his coat and laughed shyly. It was a laugh I had come to like.

“There’s a hell of a lot of work to be done still, maestro. That first act is still pretty bloody.”

“Oh, I know, I know.” He nodded vigorously. Behind his glasses his blue eyes gleamed. They were

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incredibly kind eyes, somehow softening his appearance—the lanky, stooped body, the fining hair and thin neck. “I know. It’s got a long way to go.” He squatted in front of the fire and warmed his hands.

“And only three weeks left. There’s a letter for you here. Did you see it?”

He took it eagerly. “It’s from Bloggs Minor.”

“Good for Peisthetaerus. He’s a prompt correspondent.”

“He says he’s sorry about the set falling down and wouldn’t have been in Caliban’s shoes for all the tea in China.”

“Neither would Caliban,” I said. “But the thought was sweet.”

“He’s glad the revisions went so well and wants me to send a copy to the boys so they can see what I’ve altered.”

“Do they all know the play?”

“Yes.”

I stared. “You must be quite a master.”

“Good Lord, no.” But he was reading again, devouring the unformed handwriting like a doting parent. “He wants to know if I can send him Miss Waring’s autograph and yours and Miss Dido Lambert’s. The school swimming bath is out of action again owing to the lack of fuel but they’ve had better luck with the snow and they’re hoping to play house matches at Browne’s this term.”

“Fascinating. Are they back at school then?”

“Yes. They returned last week.”

“But you—?”

“Oh, I’ve got an extra week.” He turned the page

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and read the last sentence: "Can we do *Macbeth* for this year's House Play? Parkinson's voice hasn't broken yet and he's brought a proper stiletto back to school with him."

"Sounds ominous, maestro. You'd better wire your Headmaster."

He laughed, "The little devil. His father has some sort of curio shop in Tonbridge. He turned up with a swordstick last year."

I said, "Tell me about this extra week. Why are you so privileged?"

"There's nothing to tell." He folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. "The Headmaster thought it would give me a better chance with the play."

"Very obliging of him. Has he got shares in it also?"

"Of course not." Bale grinned. "He's just . . . interested. The whole school is."

The landlady had left our supper in front of the fire. There was some soup and a little cold meat. I passed a plate to Bale. "Are they very proud of you?"

He flushed. "I don't know. It's just one of those school things. Thank you. What sort is it?"

I sniffed. "Tomato. Tell me more. Are they all waiting on tenterhooks?"

"I'm afraid so. That's the difficulty. Silly, isn't it?"

"I don't know. It's such a long time since I was at school."

"It's a little world of its own."

We continued eating in silence. The letter lay

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beside him on the bed, a link, a passport. I wondered again about Bloggs Minor. No longer was it "old Hayseed". Now it was, "I say, you chaps, here's another letter from Mr. Bale. Listen, I'll read it to you." Was he so popular then? Did the whole school wait trembling for the verdict at Golders Green?

The soup was hot. I felt less fatigued, more eager to explore. "Tell me how you came to write this play, Bale?"

"What?" His Adam's apple bobbed nervously. "Oh, no, it's a long story. You're not really interested."

"But I am. Tell me about the school, Bloggs Minor, the Headmaster with the heart of gold." There was a curious impulse behind my request. I was thinking of my return to the home in Dolney; perhaps that was the wrong place in which to find the key; perhaps Bale could hint of another. Besides, I was fascinated by this new picture of him. It was as if he'd shown me a snapshot of himself, standing beside the Founder's Statue with a pile of exercise books under one arm. It was a new dimension. He was no longer Bale, the amateur playwright. He was a person of importance, our Mr. Bale, having a romantic significance in a world which I had forgotten. I realized with a shock that his background was more foreign to me than mine was to him. He was learning about the theatre; I had forgotten about school. If there was any scorning to be done, he was the one to do it.

He was fiddling about with the cold meat. "It was the boy you called Bloggs Minor. He was the cause of it."

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"Why? Did he suggest the plot?"

"Good Heavens, no. It goes back much further than that. I warned you it was a long story, Bas."

"We've got all night. Do you want this sausage? I've had enough."

"If you don't want it. This is like a dormitory feast."

I smiled. "Is it?"

"He showed me my wife."

"I didn't know you had one."

"I haven't now." He took the sausage and balanced the plate on his knee. "She was an assistant matron in the Junior School. Her name was Caroline. Caroline Chester. She phoned one night, asking us to fetch the doctor. Two of the juniors were down with a fever. I went across with him. Allison was one of them. Caroline was making up his bed. I had never seen her before. Afterwards she said she had seen me bowling at the nets but I hoped not. I'm pretty frightful at cricket." He smiled shyly. "Then we got married."

"The same night?"

"It took a year. I'm not very good at making advances."

"And she?"

"She was no better. She was even more shy than I was. We were married in the School Chapel and we went to Cornwall for the summer holidays."

"You're moving too quickly. Who was she? What was she like?"

"Very quiet. Gentle too. The boys loved her. Particularly the little ones. They seemed to look on her

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as an elder sister. She was only nineteen. Her parents were dead. She never raised her voice. She spoke almost in a whisper."

"It must have been the quietest courtship on record. I can't imagine how you ever got as far as popping the question." I was trying to visualize Paulina in the same situation, or Dido, Audrey, even Liz, and failing dismally.

"We managed. On the honeymoon she seemed very, very happy. She talked, she even sang a bit. She made up stories about the countryside and the people. *Jamaica Inn* was still fresh in her memory. She invented the story of *Storm Thunder*."

"So it's her play?"

He nodded. "Yes, it's her play."

I lit two cigarettes and passed him one. Then I rolled back on the bed with an elbow under my head and blew smoke at the ceiling. "Young love, new wife, blissful romance. Everything in the garden very chi-chi, very pink and white, very J. M. Barrie. Did you love her?"

"I was very fond of her."

"The usher's equivalent. And then what happened?"

"She died." I sat up with a jerk. "She was never very strong," he went on, as if apologizing. "The doctor warned me about a weak chest. One day she caught a chill while taking some of the smaller boys for a walk. It developed into pleurisy and then——" His gesture completed the sentence.

"I'm very sorry." And I was.

"Of course, it was a long time ago. Four years to

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be exact. And I can't say it hasn't made any difference because it has. Things have never seemed quite the same since, but of course, the school has been wonderful. Everybody came to the funeral, even the smallest boys. They sang 'Now Sleeps the Nightingale' and every year they take her flowers and one of the boys even carved a headstone for her. It wasn't terribly good but it was something she would have liked."

"What a sweet gesture," I said.

"But they're like that. They worshipped her. I . . . I can't explain it. She was that kind of person. Strangely restful."

"Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blush'd at herself."

"Yes, that was it. Oh, look here, I'm terribly sorry. You don't want to hear all this."

"And you. What happened to you at this time?"

"Oh . . . nothing. The Headmaster offered me a short holiday but I decided to stay and work. You see she had come to love the school also. It was more than our work. It was our home. So I stayed on. I took over the Debating Society and the Dramatic Club and held play-readings three times a term. They were all substitutes but in a way they came to mean a lot to me. The next year when the school broke up there was nowhere I wanted to go but Polperro. You see I no longer thought of her with regret, but with gratitude. That's what the school had done for me. I went to the same cliffs and I remembered what she had told me about *Storm*

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Thunder and I decided to write it down, not in her memory but as a mark of my gratitude.

"I see."

"That's why the school has such a proprietary interest in the play. It had been Caroline's play; now it became the school's play. Through it they remembered her. A lot of boys who were there at the time have left and many new ones have come since, but in the memory of the school, the play has become Caroline Chester."

"They have all read it?"

"At one time or another. In all its twenty-three versions."

"Twenty-three! Good God."

"That's right." He smiled. "You see it has been going on for a long time."

"I see," I said wonderingly. "And you're still rewriting."

"Well, you said yourself it needs a lot of work. That first act—"

"I know, I know. But twenty-three! I should have thought every possible combination would have been tried by now."

"Not quite. I mean I know it's still not right and I've got sufficient faith in it to feel that it's worth getting right."

Twenty-three full versions and God knows how many independent revisions. I was thunderstruck. Here was my amateur playwright, my irritating, inexperienced intruder. I wanted to curl up into a little ball and roll away somewhere unseen. Twenty-three and I grudged him a rehearsal. I said flatly, "So?"

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"So?"

"So what happened next?"

"Nothing or apparently nothing. I went on with my life at the school until one day I realized the play had become a legend. Everybody knew about it; the school boasted about it openly. The turning-point came during the match with Clifton. One of their masters came across and asked if it were really true it was to be done at Covent Garden. It was an awful moment. You see, up to that time I hadn't thought of having it produced at all but now everybody was expecting it. More than that, they were waiting for it. Incidentally it was Bloggs Minor who spread the story of Covent Garden. Well, I had to do something. The staff was so encouraging, the boys were so insistent. Our Mr. Bale and his play. I couldn't let them down so badly."

I saw his point. "So what did you do?"

"I started sending the play to the managements: Tennents, Littler, the Company of Four. And stars: Flora Robson, Leo Genn. Damned silly, of course. It always came back. The thing was I knew it would—but the school didn't. I didn't tell them about this because I wanted so much not to disappoint them. For them I would have done anything, anything at all. They had such faith in me. I couldn't let them down."

He sat quite still for a moment, obviously wondering where he had gone wrong; at what particular point the trap had been sprung. He was so right, of course, there was nothing else he could have done. A school is a world in itself: our First Eleven, our

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Head Boy, our Debating Society, our Mr. Bale. He was trapped within the quadrangle, bound down by the essential spirit of the place of which he was otherwise a contented supporter. I could see the similarity here. The Headmaster and Sir Frank, Caroline and my mother. At what point does volition cease and compulsion take over? At what point is the trap sprung? There was so much here that I could feel with him. My excitement grew as my dread increased. "So what did you do, Bale?"

"Somebody had told me about Felix Urban. As a last resort I sent him the play and he wrote asking me to come and see him. I was wildly excited. I had never been so close before. This at least I could tell the boys. They were as thrilled as I. Our play, they said. Our play is going to be done at last."

"Don't tell me any more," I begged. "I know, I know."

"He was very charming and very interested. But the play would cost too much, he said. He would like to do it but he couldn't afford the money."

"I've heard it all before. I know, I know. Tell me the old, old story. It would cost too much. Well, this is where we came in. How much did he soak you for?"

"Three thousand. My mother's inheritance."

"A goodly sum."

So that was that. I finished my cigarette and lit another. Once he said, "What else could I have done, Bas?" and I replied, "Nothing, maestro, nothing at all." Somewhere in the town a clock struck a muffled midnight. A car hooted, emphasizing the great still-

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ness which surrounded it. The night seemed empty beyond the windows. The world had withdrawn vast distances and left us sitting alone on a pinnacle of light. I wanted to cry, "Where have we gone wrong?" but the words were futile and burst like bubbles in my brain. My body was worn out, cloaked in fatigue. I had hoped he could have helped me. I had turned to his world as I had turned to Dolney but I had found him as impotent as myself.

I said, "Of course, there is one way in which we can defeat them."

"What is that, Bas?"

"We can get the play into the West End."

But how, how? And who were They? Felix, intent only on making a living. The Headmaster, a man of obvious kindness and sympathy. Sir Frank, a harassed corpse. My mother, a distant memory. Caroline, a restful legend. Who were They and why should we defeat them?

He said, "Well, we're trying that, aren't we?"

I answered, "I wonder. I don't really know. I don't think we've been trying hard enough."

The next morning we rehearsed again. The call was for Act Two in the morning and understudies after lunch. Audrey was in a hurry to get away and meet her agent who was in town to see the show, and darling Alex had also arranged an appointment, probably an interview with the local newspaper.

My mind was not on my work. I was running the rehearsal for moves more than anything else. Much

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business had grown confused after Aaron had left us; entrances were slow, people were crossing before their cues. It was necessary to tidy it up. This made for a very dull rehearsal.

Darling Alex was the first to show his exasperation. He stormed, "Look here, Sebastian, I've been crossing on that line for weeks. You can't tell me that it's wrong." He was looking ghastly. His skin was pale yellow under the lights and he had developed a nervous tic in one eye.

I waved the prompt book at him. "The cross is marked for after the line, Mr. Ralph. I'm sorry."

"Then it's wrong," he snapped. "And in any case I don't see what possible difference it could make."

"All the difference in the world." I plodded up to the footlights. I was so tired of him. "Liz moves to the table before you. If you come in too quickly you'll get a scissors and nobody can tell me *that's* right."

"I can cross earlier if you like," Liz suggested. "It will give you a chance."

"Cross when you bloody well like," he said. "I frankly couldn't care less." As a picture of a frustrated honeymoon this was the work of an academician. Not a wrinkle had been omitted.

"When you're ready, we'll continue," I called. My heart bled for Liz. She looked as if he had struck her. I no longer had any doubts as to why they were living apart: the man was just tearing her to pieces. "I think we ought to go back a bit."

"I'm not at all sure I want to go forward," he said. He looked as if he were going to burst into tears.

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"I consider this whole rehearsal an utter waste of time."

I thought, Oh, Christ, this is it! and prepared to blow up. At that very moment Bale made his habitual entrance with the threepenny exercise-book.

"I've brought the revisions for Act One," he said happily.

He could not have chosen a worse moment. Darling Alex seemed to shrink and then enlarge. For a minute my imagination caught him as one of those monstrous rubber carnival dolls, with his feet planted firmly on the stage and his head bobbing crazily over the stalls. His face, seen at that angle, was maniacally distorted with the conflicting angles and planes of passion. He looked quite beyond himself. And then he shrank again into his normal size and became just another temperamental actor stamping round the stage.

I waited for the first lull in the uproar and then asked sweetly, "Revisions, George? For Act One you said?"

"Yes. You remember you mentioned it last night —"

"Of course I remember. Why, you do work very quickly. A regular Edgar Wallace, in fact. Yes, I think we should be able to try them out this morning." You theatrical bastards, I was thinking. I'll teach you to be temperamental.

I was conscious of the stares of the company. This was the first time Bale had been supported in the theatre and there wasn't a soul who was not aware

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of it. For a moment I found myself actually enjoying their surprise and then Audrey gasped, "Oh, not this morning, Sebastian, I must lunch with Walter. He's come all this way——"

"Now, now, darling. Walter will understand. I'm sure he will," and then I found myself wondering how to go on. I've committed myself, I thought, I'll have to go through with it. "Mr. Bale has been working all night on these revisions—haven't you, George?—and the least we can do is to give them a hearing." I paused—not for effect but because I had run out of arguments. There must be something else I can say, I thought hysterically. Just some words. And found them: "This play means a lot to him and it means a lot to us. I don't think we ought to worry about a luncheon date when there's a West End season waiting for us. And Golders Green is only two and a half weeks away, darlings, so what do you all say?"

It was the only time I have ever seen actors shorn of a retort. I could hardly blame them. Had Caliban or Dicky Sharland behaved like this, I should have gaped with the best of them. But it was I who was doing it and even I did not fully understand my behaviour. Some of it was caused by reaction to Bale's story of the night before, some of it by a desire to provoke darling Alex even further. But was this all? Surely Alex was no more than a symbol, the Sir Frank image in this tight little world of grease-paint, while Bale (bereft of his sentimental story) was almost as meaningless.

I waited for the company to recover its collective

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breath and announced, "The best thing to do is to carry on and finish this act, then have a quick lunch and be back at two for a run-through of the revisions."

Well, it was a start. A rather half-hearted one but a start nevertheless. The cast seemed too stunned to argue. Even darling Alex gave no further trouble that morning.

In view of all that, it was rather unfortunate that when we reassembled after lunch to hear the revisions, we found them quite appalling and beyond a doubt quite the worst things Bale had ever written.

"My dear, the man is an amateur," Sharland said. "You really must face up to it, you know. Personally I couldn't care a hoot what the play means to him. To me it is quite—beyond—the—pale." It was after the performance that night. We were going to have a drink together.

"But there must be some hope, Dicky. No play is as bad as that. And we've got a good cast to work with."

"*Oh*, you drive me right up! Sebastian, you really must pull yourself together. Face it, my dear, face it. The man just cannot write a play. That's all there is to it." He slipped on his coat and we left the dressing-room. At the board he paused. "Rehearsal tomorrow?"

"No, there's a *matinée*. What the devil's the use of rehearsing I'd like to know?"

"That's much more like it." He gave me a swift tap on the shoulder. "That's much more like the despondent Sebastian we know and love."

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Outside the stage door a handful of children waited for autographs. They let me through, but surged round Sharland like microbes. He smiled at them charmingly and signed their books with a flourish, politely asking whether they had liked the show and whose pen was this and did they often come to the theatre. One child seemed to engage him particularly, a schoolboy in a blue raincoat, wellingtons and cap. Dicky patted him on the shoulder, made a quip or two and flipped him under the chin.

"A special chum?" I asked.

"I've seen him before." His tone was airy, mocking my coldness. "Donald something or other. His mother keeps digs near the station. Charming." We ran across the road, skidding on the icy slush, and made for the pub.

"But there must be a solution," I said angrily. "We can't go on like this."

"Solution to what, dear? Two gins, Mrs. D., if you please, and twenty Players, thanking you kindly."

"This play! Don't you worry about it?"

"Sebastian, allow me to tell you you're being a crashing bore. I far preferred you when you snapped at people."

"I still do, blast you." I took the drink he offered and prepared to be mildly sociable. "Thanks, with lime." We drank, lit cigarettes and drank again. "Paulina gone back?"

"Thank God, yesterday." He loosened his scarf with a practised gesture. He was so obviously an actor: fleshy lips, small nose, straight brows. His hair was cut rather long and brushed straight back; his

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teeth were regular and Macleaned to a degree. When he laughed he wrinkled up his nose charmingly and gave the boyish impression of thoroughly enjoying himself. His movements were those of an actor, clipped, precise, wholly at ease. So was his voice. He was a juvenile Boyer with a Coward intonation. But there was more to him than impersonation. Beneath the smooth exterior lay the essential Sharland, sensuous and rather coarse. One caught a glimpse of the animal behind his remarks, beneath his touch. This was the cause of his obvious sex-appeal; women felt it and responded instinctively. If his manners were of the drawing-room, his morals were of the farmyard. He usually conducted four affairs simultaneously while casting casual lines over the side at the same time. He had made a god of Desire and spent all his free time on his stomach worshipping it. A Novello show had opened the stage door for him and six years later he had made three films for Rank, one of which had been shown at Cannes.

Now he looked round the bar. "Nothing very much here tonight," he said. "Call that my luck. My first night off the lead and see what happens." He finished his drink and slapped the glass on the counter.

"Sharland, you're so loose, you rattle."

He grinned. He took it as a compliment. I suppose it was in a way. Most of us dream of having endless success in *les affaires sexuelles*. "Why not?" he asked curiously. "I'm a sucker for bed, Sebastian. I've had no morals since the age of fourteen, but I've had a great deal of fun, and even of happiness. Call

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that nothing! People like you go round condemning, but we're all the same underneath. Love doesn't make the world go round; sex does. All people care about is ——ing." The use of the word was casual, calculated. It was part of his act as rudeness was part of mine. And love or sex, everybody has his act. "If everybody were as honest as I, the world would be a better place."

"It would be chaos," I said.

"That shows you agree with me. I'm not exceptional, I'm merely frank. We're all the same, only some more than others as the dear master once said." He caught the eye of a girl drinking at the bar, winked and lit another cigarette. "You're as celibate as a priest without an acolyte to keep your hand in."

I wanted to ask him about darling Alex—I had an idea that he could explain a lot to me—but some damned priggishness restrained me. I wondered instead if he had already beaten me to the post with Liz. But I thought not. She was not his type. He needed somebody as animal as himself, like Paulina, or somebody like Dido, capable of corruption. For what is impropriety without depravity and what has a greater attraction than the innocence we have ceased to believe in?

The girl at the bar was watching him intently. She was not alone but she had forgotten her companions. She was leaning forward with her thighs pressed together, her lips parted, the tip of a pink tongue just showing between her teeth. She must have been either very drunk or very lonely. One of her friends spoke to her and she answered without

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taking her eyes from Sharland. Her stare was quite naked, her thoughts were quite obvious. I felt like a *voyeur*; as if I had stumbled over a couple on the beach or found an uncurtained window on the other side of the street.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, Dicky. You don't need a threesome at a time like this."

He smiled quietly. "You're a fool, Sebastian. You're condemning me even now."

"No, envying you, Dicky."

At that moment there came a squeal of brakes from the street followed by an ominous thud. Somebody screamed and there was a general rush to the door. When I saw the girl again she was alone.

Dicky was murmuring, "Well, of course, if you don't *want* another drink . . ."

When the men returned she introduced him and he joined them for the next round of drinks. It was as easy as that. The barmaid was saying, "These icy roads, something cruel they are. Why, only last week . . ."

Live and let live, I thought. Is there a wind so foul that some man does not derive benefit from it.

Two days later Bale went off to a cinema with Caliban and I took Liz to lunch. My calculations were as cold as Sharland's, my intentions as obvious. I am not a man of stone. Neither does my nature please me. Like all men I talk a lot but dream a great deal more. We are all boasters scribbling our deeds on the wall but lacking proof of their accomplishment.

Ten years ago things might have been different.

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But many changes gain ground in ten years and one of them is that we no longer try to be good.

And now it was all over. She was lying in my dressing-gown on my bed. I was sitting by the fire. The room seemed infinitely cold. I was like a man living in an ice-chest.

She was saying, "Do you hate me now? I had to prove . . . to prove to myself. Will you hate me always?"

I said, "We cannot hate. Only God can do that. But I wish you hadn't taken me as your guinea-pig." There was no pleasure in the conquest, if conquest it had been. I was as bereft as an orphan; as lost as last year's summer.

She started to weep again. The sound no longer gnawed at my nerves. It lulled me, soothing me on, an accompaniment to my own mood. Physiologically speaking, Aaron had lost his bet. Emotionally speaking, he had won it hands down. She was as cold as graphite, as untutored as stone. She never knew what passion was.

For a moment my mind was shaken by a futile rage. I wanted to strangle her, hit her, spit on her to recover some of my own spent self-respect. Violence seemed the only answer. There was no other way in which I could restore the former state of the world and I was lifted up on a gigantic wave of fury which made me clutch the poker and swing on her suddenly.

She cried, "Don't, Sebastian, you're mad——"

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and the words seemed to unlock the door in my heart. "Yes, mad," I said and my anger flooded away. There are no excuses for me. I can only plead forbearance. I was like a man who for months has steeled himself to commit a theft. But when he has done so, he finds the safe empty. There was nothing there I could take. Utterly enraged I had wanted to smash everything in the shop.

She was crying out loud, holding the dressing-gown about her as if she feared the sight of her marble flesh might drive me to worse onslaughts than those she had already experienced and it was this instinctive action which restored my sanity. I thought of a small child who has been told by its mother to pull her skirt down; she does not know why; she only knows she has been told to do so. Liz was like this. She would never know why. It was less than innocence; to my dying day I'll call it no state of grace. It was an anatomical omission as if she had been born with certain parts of her body missing. For this I ought to have pitied her. But I am only a man, not a saint, and I could only dislike her.

She was Rachel without the love for Storm; Desdemona without the love for Othello.

I went up to the window and looked out at the white sky and the black buildings and the shredded trees and the falling snow. It was like time passing, gently, inexorably. Between one flake and the next lay a world and a lifetime, Sir Frank and my mother, Adam and the railway porter. Flickering they dropped to the ground, away out of sight, and then were gone.

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I cried out, "He should have warned me of this," and let the poker drop to the floor. I don't know whom my words concerned but when I thought of them, the image of Bale rose between me and the snow and I heard him talking of faith and gratitude and love, all those emotions I had come to suspect. For a moment I was so sure of his presence I thought I heard his voice and, turning, thought: He's found me out at last, he's returned from the cinema too soon.

But only Liz lay on the bed, terrified and wide-eyed, as helpless as a widow with her weeds wrapped round her, showing off the sculptor's form. I went across to her, prepared to do penance, saying, "I'm sorry, Liz, I don't know what came over me," but thinking, You bloody liar, you're sorry for nothing.

She drew away with knees together and hands pressed to her breasts and just as her former modesty had calmed me, this withdrawal exploded something in my brain. All the pent-up love, the regret, the self-pity seemed to blow up at once. I realized I wanted nothing more than to destroy her and, in so doing, to destroy the picture of me she held in her eyes.

If you hate me, you bitch, I'll give you something to hate me for.

I leapt across at her but someone was hammering on the door. The noise of it seemed to split my head, undoubtedly saving us both from disaster. I left her then and called thickly, "Yes, what is it?"

"Telephone, Mr. Shepherd."

Yes, saved by the bell. It was incredible how close

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violence was that day. I said, "I'm coming," and left without looking at the figure on the bed.

When I came back she was dressed. She must have seen something in my face for she dropped her belt and came to me running, appalled. "What is it, Sebastian? What has happened?"

I thought, There must be a hundred and one ways of telling her this but I cannot think of them. I am beyond tact and feeling now. I took her hand and said softly, urgently, "We must go to the theatre, Liz. They tell me Alex has tried to commit suicide."

Chapter Six

THE NEXT day I called the company together. They sat on hard seats, staring at me.

I said, "Now we'll start. I've called this conference for two reasons. One: Alex is in a nursing-home and won't be back for another ten days—if then. As his understudy I shall continue to play his part. Two: I am going to begin work on this play and I am going to make you work as you have never worked before. As Aaron's deputy I shall take full responsibility for this. I intend to reproduce the play on the lines laid down by him in the first rehearsals. I want you to understand that—but clearly. If there are any doubts about moves or intonations, I shall be the judge. If you disagree, there is a phone in the box office. Ring Felix, Aaron, Robin or whoever you goddam like, but ring now because tomorrow will be too late. Far too late. Now think it over."

I walked down to the floats and then back again. They thought. I said, "Well, what questions?"

"Sebastian, darling, how is Alex?" It was Maire, anxiously clutching her handbag.

"He'll recover, Mother Mary. They got most of the stuff out of him. It didn't have a chance to work. Any more?"

"And Liz?" This was Audrey, fingering her horn-rimmed spectacles.

"She's staying at the nursing-home for the time

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being. Until she returns, Dido will play Monica. Any more?"

This time they didn't answer.

"I take it then that you are prepared to accept the ultimatum?"

"It's up to you, Sebastian, you're the boss."

"If you get too bad we can call Equity."

"At least it's worth a try."

"Caliban? Dido? No comments?" They shook their heads. "Right, then we'll start. Clear for Act One, please."

They left in silence. The theatre was hushed, waiting. "One more thing. Can you all hear me?"

"Yes, Sebastian."

"Caliban, come here, please."

"Yes, Mr. Shepherd?"

"This change is going to affect you more than anybody else. As I'll be playing as well as producing, I'll have no time for the prompt corner. This means much more work and responsibility for you. You'll get little thanks for it, but I wish you all to understand—everybody—that he is my assistant and to respect him as your stage manager. Is that clear?"

"But, Mr. Shepherd——?"

"Is that clear—everybody?"

"Yes, Sebastian."

"Right. See me afterwards about the lighting-plot. Dido will have to take over small props. Liz will help with wardrobe. Finally: our author returns to school at the end of this week. As long as he is with us we'll continue to try out every revision he submits to me. You've got to understand that. This

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play has been left to rot too long. Both Felix and Aaron have lost interest. From now on it is up to us.

"Right. Beginners, please. Caliban, it's your baby."

We started. Stephen sat beside me with the prompt copy, checking all moves. We could change nothing at this stage. It was my job merely to revise the directions issued by Aaron. He had produced the play.

"Curtain up!"

The mewling of seagulls filled the theatre. In the distance waves crashed against a beach and withdrew with the dragging of shingle. Audrey left the table and went up to the bay window. "Laura," she called, "you can clear away now. We're finished."

I made a note: the seagulls were too loud.

After a while I was called to the telephone. Robin said, "How are you managing, Bas? They've just told me the news."

"Very well, Robin. I have made certain changes but we're coping."

"I wish I could get up to you but this new show is giving us hell. Aaron is at his wit's end."

"He always is. But this one is going very sweetly."

"Why did he do it, Bas? Have you seen him?"

"I don't know. I'm going to the nursing-home this afternoon. I don't think it concerns us."

"Of course it does. It was in our theatre. He is a member of our company. Of course it concerns us."

"Then I have no intention of finding out. It's a matter for the police. Or Liz. If they're interested."

"If they're—? Bas . . . Bas . . . what is it? Hullo, have we been cut off?"

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"Not completely. How was the Covent Garden interview?"

"I'll come up and see you next week. Listen, Bas——"

I replaced the receiver and went back to the rehearsal. As far as I was concerned, the town office was a million miles away. And so was Robin. And so was Liz. Only the play remained.

The nursing-home to which they had taken him was in the country. Through the car windows I could see the fells of West Riding, desolate and harsh in the grip of winter. The sun was going as we turned in at the gates.

He had been sleeping but he opened his eyes when I came in and greeted me quietly. "It was good of you to come, Sebastian. I think you must hate me more than ever."

"On the contrary." I wanted to tell him that I had learnt a great deal in the last twenty-four hours; had grown up at least ten years. "The company send you their love, Alex. They would have come out today but I kept them rehearsing."

He smiled bitterly. "Still on the job, eh? I am sorry for the trouble I caused you, Sebastian."

"You've caused me no trouble. Any there was I caused myself."

He was not really listening. "Leading man with sleeping-pills. In the theatre too. Shocking behaviour. Who'd be a stage manager?"

"I would. Sometimes." I moved to him. "Are you

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all right now? Would you like to sleep? I can't stay long."

"I'm a Catholic, you know," he announced suddenly. "I went to a Jesuit school. I wear a crucifix round my neck and go to Mass on Sundays even if there is a train call."

"I know."

"But still it seemed almost worth it."

"I don't want to hear, Alex."

"That's what they all say. Except Liz. She just weeps." He looked at me sadly. "Why did I marry, Sebastian? Life was just as useless without it."

I moved to the windows. The hills were black with shadow. A wind rustled the trees; I could see their branches bobbing and swaying, grotesquely, like the arms of paupers seeking charity.

"There is a bench out there with an inscription. 'They love not poison that do poison need.' "

"A fine thing for a hospital. Have you seen it?"

"No, Liz told me. Do you know the play, Sebastian? I did it once at Oxford.

*"I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And, for because the world is populous,
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it.*

"Apt, isn't it? And then:

*"I wasted time, and now doth time waste me;
For now hath time made me his numbering clock:
My thoughts are minutes; and, with sighs, they
jar*

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*Their watches on unto my eyes, the outward
watch,
Whereto my finger, like a dial's point,
Is pointing still, in cleansing them from tears.*

"You can keep your Hamlets, Sebastian, and your
Lears and Macbeths. Just give me Richard.

*"Give me the crown.—Here, cousin, seize the
crown;
On this side my hand, and on that side yours.
Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another;
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen, and full of water:
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.
. . . What more remains?"*

"You're talking too much, Alex."

"What more remains, Sebastian? Must I lick your
boots and call you Sir Stage Manager?"

"You'll soon be well again." But even I turned
from that platitude.

"Well!" He swung on me with something of his
old vehemence. "Well! Since when have you turned
doctor, priest, almoner? What is this process—the
humouring of would-be suicides?"

"The humbling of Sebastian Shepherd," I said.
"Believe me, Alex, this has nothing to do with what
happened last night. It's something that concerns
me."

"What was that?"

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"I can't tell you. I just grew up slightly. Can I smoke in here?"

"Don't let the Sister catch you. You can give me a draw." He smiled. "Yesterday seems to have been quite a day. Were you with Liz? Sharland told me you were lunching together."

"Yes. Sort of. In a way." I lit a cigarette and passed it to him. "She was with me when the theatre phoned."

"I see"—but I hoped he didn't—"well, I hope you had more luck with her than I did."

I turned away. I could not bear the look in his eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

"No, I don't suppose you do," he answered, and the door opened and she came in. There were black rings under her eyes and her hair had been dragged back into a sort of bun which destroyed the long line of her neck. Her whole beauty—if beauty it had been—had passed away. Only the bones remained, gaunt, pressed against the skin.

"I thought you had gone," he said to her.

"No, I . . ." she turned to me uncertainly, hesitated, then dropped the greeting. "I was with the doctor."

"That quack," he observed bitterly. He was watching us like a lynx. I wondered how much he knew or suspected. I wondered but could not ask. I did not want the answer. That would only have increased my feeling of guilt.

"He says you must go to sleep when Sebastian has gone."

"Then I'll go now," I said.

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"There's no hurry—"

"No hurry at all," he remarked smoothly. "Liz has to go back anyway. You might as well stay and run her back in your taxi. That would be very convenient."

"She doesn't have to play tonight," I told him. "Dido is ready to go on for her again." For some reason I found it easier to talk to her in the third person.

"That would be unnecessary as well as unprofessional. Of course she must play tonight. I've already put everybody to far too much trouble. I couldn't possibly ask you to be so considerate to my wife. And wife she still is. And in any case, there's nothing for her to do here. The nurses will make quite sure I don't cut my throat."

He was baiting her deliberately and for the first time I found myself unable to take sides. My feelings for them both had changed so much in the last few hours.

I went back to the window. It was like a play and I did my best to efface myself from the scene; as if the curtain had risen to disclose three people instead of two. But it was a play for which there was no script and few stage directions. The actors were merely feeling their way, puppets again without the attentions of the puppet-master. She was saying, "I'd rather stay," and he replied, "Why, have you lost your nerve?"—"It's just because——"—"Because of me? You can rest assured I'll sleep tonight."—"I want to stay."—"You'd better fetch your coat. Your keeper's waiting."—"He doesn't want me."—

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"Perhaps he does. Have you asked him?"—"No. No, I have not asked him."

Outside the tree dipped and pondered and rose again. Puppets on thin wires always enclosed by glass. Always the dividing-line. Always beyond my reach. Let go forrad, let go aft. Easy astern. The world is not for you. The world is for him and him and him but the world is not for you. Stand by curtain. Stand by music. Houselights out. Curtain up. Let the puppets sing and dance. Their world is not your world. Beyond the lighted square the darkness waits, heaving like a sea, heaving like a sickness, heaving like a tree bent on the wind of winter.

"We'd better go."

"I'll fetch my coat."

"I'll wait for you outside."

"I won't be long."

"I'll come again."

"Yes, come again."

Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after and every day for, oh, so long.

"You'll be leaving soon."

"On Sunday at nine."

"Then I'll wish you luck."

"You'll come back to us, Alex . . . ?"

"Perhaps, Sebastian. 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.' There is a bench outside . . . did I tell you that?"

"You told me that."

"I am tired, Sebastian. I think I shall sleep to-night."

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"Yes, sleep tonight, Alex. Tomorrow is another day."

"Bringing what, Sebastian . . .?"

"We don't know, Alex. But we can hope."

In the car she hardly spoke at all. I told her about the new rehearsals and the change in tempo and she said wearily, "I'm sure it's a good idea." If she recognized it as my expiation she did not remark upon it. She left me that. One pert comment would have undercut its value.

I found Bale waiting for me in Alex's dressing-room. He greeted me cheerfully and said, "I've brought you this. I hope you'll like it."

"What is it?"

"A new opening for Act One."

"God, how you work. Is it worth it, Bale?"

"I think so. I should be unhappy if I didn't."

"The greatest futility of all. Delusions of happiness."

He shrugged, unconvinced. "Perhaps. How is Alex?"

"I wish I knew. We know nothing. He'll live but not because he wants to."

"Why did he do it? Did he tell you?"

"I didn't ask. Was that very cowardly of me? I felt I couldn't face it. He said something about uselessness."

"That accounts for your mood."

"Does it? Perhaps so. Perhaps I'm feeling it's all pretty useless myself."

"It isn't, you know."

"No?"

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"I don't think so."

"Then you're lucky."

"No," he said. "I am not particularly lucky." We spoke for a few moments about the play.

"What have you done?"

"I've cut out Essie and tightened the opening scene with Audrey and Maire. It helps to explain the situation much more firmly." He showed me the exercise-book. The idea looked good.

"We can try it like that next week, but don't forget the latecomers. Don't lose your play in the slamming of seats."

"I shan't, but I'll remember that."

I was paging through the exercise-book and came across something new. "What have you got here?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just some ideas for the next one."

"The next one? You've got courage, magister, you haven't failed at this yet."

He smiled. "There seems a good chance of it."

"Would it break your heart, losing your money and disappointing the school?"

"Not really. One can always try again."

"Uncle Bruce," I mocked him. "Never say die. But it's better than having an Uncle Frank. If you should see Caliban will you ask him to call a rehearsal tomorrow?"

"There's a *matinée*, Bas. They won't like it."

"Then they can all go and commit suicide," I said. "Hooray, hell. Shall I see you after the show?"

"I'll wait for you," he promised. "Good luck."

"And to you," I replied. "But you don't need it."

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The next morning I went to the theatre early. I wanted to reset one of the spots. The light was not hitting the table squarely and was throwing a shadow across the face of anybody sitting at it.

Caliban was already there. He greeted me. "The hospital's just phoned. They wanted to know if Miss Rudge was here."

"Anything the matter?"

"I don't think so. They didn't say. They seemed ever so cold and polite."

"They always are. It's part of the Hippocratic way of life: I promise to do my duty and be rude to at least one person every day. Very antiseptic. You're looking so swish today I'm scared to be seen talking to you. Going to a funeral?" He was wearing a drape suit and Tottenham Court Road tie with sunbursts.

"No, I . . ."

"I know. Dido's pinched all your others."

He blushed and stammered, "I thought of going to see darling . . . Mr. Ralph, that is."

"Very difficult, very rushed. Rehearsal this morning, matinée this afternoon, get-out tonight. When did you bank on going?"

"I thought after the matinée. If you don't mind."

"Caliban, my slave, if I don't mind? What's Hecuba to me?"

"I don't know. I thought . . ." He hesitated painfully. He was like a child having a difficult conversation with a maiden aunt; trying to be polite, trying to hide something. Then suddenly, biff bang, "Mr. Shepherd, why did he do it?"

"For God's sake!" This question was driving me

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up the wall. Did they all expect me to shout, "Because I made love to his wife"? They'd have to wait for that. "You must ask him yourself," I said gently.

"Oh, I couldn't do that——"

"Then don't ask me——"

"No, I'm sorry——"

"—I'm only the stage manager, not his Father Confessor. I've got nothing to tell you."

"Of course, I understand. I'm awfully sorry——"

"Caliban, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Mr. Shepherd."

"Then nothing it is." I took his arm and drew him to the table. "Now sit down and tell me nothing."

He looked glum. "It's . . . well, it was that business a couple of weeks ago."

"What business?"

"You and Miss Rudge. Oh, I didn't mean to ask you. It's none of my business——"

"What business? Do you mean when you found us in the circle bar?"

"Yes."

"I see. So you were wondering whether Liz and I were having an affair. You thought that may have made Alex try suicide. Is that it?" He nodded miserably. "Of course. How very trying. You know, you and Dido are the strangest couple. There's not an ounce of sophistication in either of you. I can't understand it. Kids in prep school are less shockable than you are. Dido upsets herself over a mildly flirtatious remark from Dicky Sharland and you give yourself the horrors over a perfectly innocent little

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scene at the end of a rehearsal. And you've been brought up on the stage, pretty well born in a prop basket! It's staggering." I was talking to waste time, of course. There was only one answer I could give. But by talking I was hoping to dilute the lie. "Well, you'll be very pleased to know that Miss Rudge and I are nothing but friends. And not even very good friends as it happens at the moment." After all there was some truth in that. Not much, but some. We were acquaintances certainly. We had knowledge of each other. It was quite by the way that the knowledge happened to be somewhat carnal.

He nodded but did not look up. He was still overcome with embarrassment at his part in the scene.

"There now. Does that make you feel better?"

"It was none of my business."

"I know. But you had made it yours." I patted him on the shoulder. "Cheer up, Caliban. It's been very trying for us all. Don't take all the worry on your shoulders. They're . . . rather padded. You're so smart today. I don't think I dare ask you to work."

He smiled ruefully, "Actually it's quite old. I only wear it on special occasions."

"Of which today is one." I shuddered. "But take off that tie, it dazzles me something terrible."

"Oh, hell, is it too bright, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Bright? It puts the spot-bar to shame. Have a look in my dressing-room, you'll probably find some there."

I was trying to assure him that everything was all right. That he could relax with me again; that I was really a hell of a fine fellow; not the sort that seduces

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a bride and drives the groom to luminal. And it wasn't so difficult because he wanted to believe that.

"There's one with a red stripe. If you don't mind, could I borrow that?"

When Dido appeared we were once again on the best of terms, chattering away like two parakeets. But she brought her own problem, one I had been dreading.

"Bas, Bas, can you come for a minute? There's somebody who wants to see you at the stage door."

"Who, darling?"

"A reporter." She stared at me helplessly. "I didn't know what to tell him. He kept talking about suicide."

"In the theatre? Insane. Send him away." But I could see that he had followed her, was standing in the prompt corner watching us. A story like this could kill the show; would have the police round asking for alibis and looking for hidden motives. We were doing our best to scotch the rumours. "Everybody knows it was just a breakdown," I said, lifting my voice and *projecting* into the prompt corner: "reporters are always looking for news, darling, but go and tell him we haven't any. We're a very ordinary company with a happy cast and a nice little play." No reason why I shouldn't insinuate a little publicity while I was about it.

He came on stage, a pleasant-looking fellow in a corduroy cap and Shrewsbury tie. "Mr. Shepherd? Barker of *The News*. Don't want to bother you. Heard you had a spot of excitement the other night. Mr. Ralph. Wondered if you had anything to say."

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"Not a thing," I claimed hurriedly. "We gave you the hand-out yesterday. Mr. Ralph is sick, indisposed, that's all."

"Uh-huh. Doorkeeper said he found him in his dressing-room, stuffed full of sleeping-pills."

"Doorkeeper's lying." I shrugged. "You know what these people are. Nothing to do all day but fight off the gallery-girls."

"What about Richard Sharland? Can he help?"

"Why Sharland?"

"Heard he was in the theatre at the time."

"Was he? I didn't know. You'd better ask him. But I don't think he'll have anything to say."

"Not if we promised him a photograph?" He lifted an eyebrow. A clever young fellah, very unscrupulous, very successful, very twentieth century. But he had seen too much of Hollywood.

"Actors would do anything for publicity," I agreed. "They'd roast and eat alive all the members of the *Oklahoma* chorus for the sake of a column. But one thing they won't do is get mixed up in a libel suit. It's not worth it, Mr. Baker."

"Barker. And nobody mentioned libel."

"I did. It's a dangerous thing, Mr. Baker. Burns quicker than high octane and leaves a nasty stain. We're all human, Mr. Baker, even in the theatre. But no actor is going to ruin his prospects quite as stupidly as that."

He was undecided. He was only half twentieth century. He wasn't quick enough.

"Now if you want an interview with Mr. Ralph, I'm sure it could be arranged. He's very much better

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already. It's wonderful what a few days' rest will do. We're hoping he'll rejoin us at the end of next week for the London run and I'm quite sure he'll be interested in a paragraph with a neat sub-title. You know what these actors are: such stuff as vanity is made of."

We got rid of him eventually. Personally I could not wait to leave that theatre. It was as full of pitfalls as a disused quarry.

Then we went on to the rehearsal. The strain was beginning to tell. We had already been rehearsing for seven weeks and playing for four and the first enthusiasm which had greeted my ultimatum was wearing off. The actors were starting to bicker, ask too many questions, throw up too many objections. We tried out Act Two. I straightened as many of the moves as I could and cleared up some of the entrances and effects. But once again we were hampered by the script. Bale was working like a maniac. Every night when I went to bed he stayed up with his exercise-book, rewriting and cutting. But it was having no effect. I was beginning to doubt whether it would ever have any effect.

Then suddenly we had the miracle. It was the scene between Danny and Rachel when he tells her what his home has come to mean to him after his wanderings round the world. Suddenly it was there—in granite, in diamonds, in mink. In the colours of Turner, the words of Blake. It was there.

"Well, thank God for that," I cried. "At last, at last. What did you do?"

"I moved down later," Dicky said. "What did it look like?"

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"Terrific!"

"Very good."

"It's amazing," Bale's eyes were goggling. "Do you mean to say a move makes all that difference?"

"All that difference, magister. It goes to show what a bit of production will do. Go on, Dicky."

"Shall I keep it in, Bas?"

"I don't think you'd better. We can't monkey about with the production. But try and keep that timing of the speech. Use it this afternoon."

He did but without success. We were all crowded into the wings waiting for the revelation which failed to arrive. He spluttered his way through the words and we sighed in concord.

"But he had it this morning," Bale said. "What has happened now?"

"It looks as if it's in the moves, magister."

"And those you can't alter?"

"Not without permission."

"Hell! But still it proves something, doesn't it?" His face was ablaze with excitement. His eyes were bulging. His very Adam's apple seemed to be vibrating with wonder. It was the first time his play had come alive. To him it was the Creation, the burning bush, the Sermon on the Mount. All things bright and beautiful. Whatever happened now, he would never surrender. He had seen the vision. He would go on writing bad plays until the pen dropped from his palsied fingers. It was the Miracle of Fatima in the private eye of George Bale.

"Oh, yes, it does prove something. That's the

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infuriating part. It's like a skin disease; from now on we'll never stop scratching."

Sharland came to me after the matinée. He said, "I'd like to try that scene again. I'm not sure but I think I've got the answer."

"What?"

"A pause."

"Is that all? Did you use one this morning?"

"Yes. I remember thinking I was going to dry and then at the last moment I recalled the line."

"Then let's try it." The stage was in darkness. I found some lights and I read Rachel while he ran through the scene. At first there appeared to be something in what he had said but then we lost it.

Caliban appeared. "I heard voices. Can I help at all?"

"Yes. Take the book. I want to go in front."

We tried it again. This time Caliban stumbled and threw the scene before they reached the cue. Dicky cursed, he apologized and they started again. And again. They went through it a dozen times and each time the vision grew fainter. It was water in a sieve, snow on the desert. And the words, the ineffectual words, were not helping. They grew more banal, more meaningless. They were like dried peas, rattling. With every attempt our grip on the image lessened. After a while we began to doubt its existence.

"But we had it. I know we had it."

"Perhaps if we altered the moves," he suggested.

"Perhaps, but it can't be done."

"Or the positions."

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"Nor that. It's Aaron's production, Dicky. We can't alter. We can only improve what he's given us."

"But if I could just try it, Sebastian. If I could move to the table a speech earlier, it would give me a much better chance—"

"We can try it, Dicky, but there's no point because we can't keep it. His moves have been marked in the book."

"He'll never know."

"But I shall."

"Well, let's just try it."

We did and there was something in what he said. By moving earlier, he achieved a better balance for the swing round.

"What about trying that first speech a little more slowly, Dicky, and then building it up towards the end? I think you're throwing it away too much."

"Like this?" He did it and it worked. There was a glimmer there.

"Possibly. How would it be if you did the whole scene from down there and just turned out for the two big speeches?"

"Let's see. Give me the cue, Caliban."

It was phoney.

"Then if we swapped positions completely; brought Audrey down stage and made her play up to you. Then you can come down towards the end." It was maddening. It was worse than looking for the proverbial needle. It was searching for the one fish in the ocean, the one ant in the nest. The more we tried, the more it eluded us. Still there were the

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compensations. We found a way of clearing up Dicky's exit and leaving the stage for Adam and we also found a better cue for the effects record.

The company returned. Dido came and Maire. Somebody started assembling the baskets for the get-out. Audrey turned up with Stephen and Caliban dropped the curtain. We tried the scene straight through with Audrey for the last time. It was good.

"I like it," she said. "It's comfortable."

"Yes," said Stephen, "it looks right."

"Can you stay down there for the whole scene and let him come to you at the end?"

"Oh, yes, easily. It's right, too. Isn't it, darling?"

"I think so." Her husband blinked solemnly. He was developing into a good critic. He had the outsider's eye, the detachment we lacked. "It's the sort of thing Rachel would do. A stillness. Repose. Let him come to her."

"The advantage of having a psychiatrist in the family. It's a nice idea, Stephen."

"Are we going to keep it?"

"Oh, Lord. I don't know. I really don't know."

We looked at one another. What was the professional attitude in a case like this? Had I been entrusted with the producer's authority as well as his responsibility? Could I change the production if I honestly thought the innovation better?

"Let's risk it," said Sharland.

"It's awkward," said Audrey. "Aaron could turn very nasty."

"I'll tell you what." I decided to compromise. "We'll use it for the moment only in rehearsal."

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Play it tonight the way you've always done it. Perhaps Aaron and Robin will come up next week and we can show it to them. How's that?"

"A damned shame," Dicky shrugged. "I've almost forgotten the old moves."

"Half-hour, please," called Caliban.

"But better than nothing. It means we can experiment, Bas." She linked her arm in mine. "I know nothing will please you more."

I grinned. "How well you know me. For God's sake let's stand on our own feet."

"Shall I mark it in the script?" asked Dido. "Or just make a note of it?"

"Just make a note of it, darling. We'll ask permission of our betters when they deign to call upon us."

Liz arrived and we broke up to go to the dressing-rooms. I had finished making up when I remembered darling Alex. "Caliban!"

"Yes, Mr. Shepherd?"

"I'm sorry, I've only just remembered. You were going to see Mr. Ralph after the matinée. You should have reminded me. You haven't even had your tea."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter, Mr. Shepherd. Honest." He smiled. His eyes were like sudden clear pools in that tangle of crêpe hair. He gave a hitch to his trousers. "At least I got a tie out of you."

"You'd better keep it. As a reward. Thank you for helping us."

"It's my job," he said very importantly and then, as if reminded of his duties, he banged on the door

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like a true professional. "Fifteen minutes, Mr. Shepherd!"

"Thank you, Mr. Lambert." I smiled and went back to my grease-paint. Things, I thought, were beginning to turn out well.

Bale thought so too. He saw us off next morning as his train did not leave until midday. "The company are certainly rallying. It's amazing how you've made them pull together."

"It's nothing I've done. It's the usual thing. They take three weeks to settle down together and three weeks to pull together. After that they're friends for life—or enemies."

"They're friends," he said.

I climbed into the train and he said goodbye to Maire and Dicky and the two children. I think they were sorry to see him go. In a way we had all grown rather fond of our foreigner. "I'll be back for Golders Green," he promised, "and there'll be lots of letters and revisions before then."

"With Bloggs Minor on the sending end this time. Give him my regards, magister. Tell him how much I'm looking forward to seeing him as Macbeth."

"That's a vow," he said. "You'll never get out of it now. It'll be the biggest thing in his life."

The train hooted. "Don't forget that play, Bas."

"Which one?"

"The one you're going to write."

"Go to hell," I shouted. "I hope you roast. You and *Storm Thunder* both."

He laughed and waved until the train left the platform. It seemed wrong to leave him there. I

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remembered the day Dido had described him as "nice, tallish, dreadfully nervous, like a fish out of water", and wondered how she would describe him now. He had found a place in the company all right. I would miss him in the digs and the dressing-room. I had come to count on him quite a lot.

Suddenly I found myself thinking of an incident at school. The music-teacher had run away with the wife of one of the form-masters. It created quite a stir at the time particularly as he had always struck us as rather a colourless creature, mild but pleasant. While discussing the incident with one of the other boys, I said, "I liked him. He had a nice personality." Doubtless I was airing a newly acquired catch-word. "No," said my friend, "you're quite wrong. The thing about X is that he has *no* personality. That's why we liked him." Looking back now, I realize even more clearly what an astute diagnosis that was. We had liked him without ever really being aware of him but his sudden departure had rendered him important. It was the same with Bale. We had rarely noticed him, but now that he had gone I knew we were going to miss him. Already I was looking forward to Golders Green.

Dicky was thinking of him also. "The trouble is that damned awful script," he said. "There is a limit to the number of changes you can make in the moves. After a while you'll find you'll have to start on the lines."

I laughed. "Now you're going a little too far."

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"Think so?" He smiled quizzically. "Bet you."

I didn't tell him I was off betting for life. I just shook my head. "Take my word."

"No, you take mine," he said. And now the smile lost its charm; just became smug.

"There's a world of difference," I said, "between mucking about with a production and rewriting someone else's play."

Chapter Seven

WE had two weeks left before Golders Green. We could never forget this; it scared us and tempted us simultaneously. As each date passed, we felt like prisoners approaching the day of release—not that we thought of it as a release. It was not entirely an ending. From it something else might come—or nothing. It was up to us completely. Sharland said it was up to the managers. I said, “No. It is up to us. We have to make them think it’s good even if we know it’s bloody awful.”

In Ne—— we found our reputation had preceded us. Many seats had been returned because of Mr. Ralph’s indisposition. Aaron was right: the man did have a name.

The house manager gave us the news. “Still we can but hope,” he said. He rubbed his hands together and bowed involuntarily. He had the face of a money-lender and the principles of a careerist beggar. His skin was pimply. His sleek hair shed a continual deposit of dandruff over his blue serge. I could see him running a profitable sideline in art photographs, rather fuzzy and out of focus. Not that I have anything against art photographs; I just object to the sort of people from whom one has to buy them.

He showed us the booking plans and in retaliation I showed him the reviews. They left us equally depressed. They were all terrible.

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"Still we mustn't despair," he said.

I was certain he had bad teeth. Probably with the sort of shows he got he couldn't afford to have them replaced.

"Never say die," he quipped.

I could visualize the list of clichés hanging in the box office along with the telephone numbers and the calendar from Messrs. Somebody's Service Station and Garage with the seedy blonde on the cover. I could see him bringing them all out in working order and guessed the next to be, "Still the show must go on," and it was and I was so surprised I choked on my cigarette and got the inevitable, "Hullo, something gone down the wrong way?" in reply.

When I went back into the theatre I found Caliban ready to light. We started on the spots. "One on the desk. Two in the bay window. Three up stage of the window. Four on the rocking-chair. Five in the hall. Six on the table. Seven on the chest. Eight on the kitchen door."

"Only got five," the electrician muttered gloomily. He looked at them suspiciously as if expecting them to disappear at any moment.

"What's happened to the others?"

"U.S." He shrugged slowly. "Dunno really."

"Can't you repair them?"

He sucked his teeth thoughtfully. "Wouldn't like to say."

"What about colours?"

His expression brightened. "Straw?" he asked hopefully.

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"Nothing else?"

He shook his head. "Had a pink once. Long time ago." He ambled away and returned half-an-hour later with a surprise pink and two cracked ambers. "These any good to you?"

"Why not? We're not proud. Bring them on." Shades of the Old Vic, I thought. Juliet in liver-coloured tights and Iago in straw.

We started to light. Sharland and Dido were having a flaming row. I could hear phrases like, "not your street woman" and "do it yourself!", "Don Juan" and "Casanova". Dicky's contributions seemed confined to "blissful, darling" and "you hysterical Girl Guide". The electrician pottered amiably up and down the ladder and Caliban wandered about the stage, alternately lit by amber and straw jellies and resembling some very lost extra in a synopsis by Dante Alighieri.

I've got to start from the beginning, I was thinking. I must comb it with the leg of a chair. Every move must be scrutinized for there must be no experimenting for experiment's sake. That way Equity lies. Check on the effects, tighten up the scene-change, work on the lights. One pink and two ambers——

"Further up stage, Bert, that's not quite catching his face. Move about, Caliban."

But would that be enough? Introduce bits of business—Sharland's pause, that look from Audrey. Try and build around something that isn't there. Bricks without straw; a frame without a picture. How pretty can you make it look? How convincing?

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"That's it. Set it there. Caliban, kindly tell your sister to make less noise. She sounds like a circular saw. It's all very distracting. Now Number Four, Bert. On the rocking-chair and just touching the table."

If the school wanted a play in the West End they should have written one. For the play is the thing. You can't trick this one out with Chinese lanterns and stepladders. Can't do it with moves and bits of business either. Then what? How right was Sharland? Would I have to start work on the lines next? I could not do it. Then how to do it? With background music—my pet aversion—the last resort of a desperate producer. No, there was only one way to do it. With the curtain down. Firmly down. Screwed down if necessary.

"That one seems a bit wonky, Bert. It's flickering like a heliograph. Have you got a bad connection?"

Poor Bert, no connection at all. He grins. See the way he climbs that ladder. Old, old, old man. What does he know of love? Not doing so well yourself. Blast Liz. Blast Alex. Blast S. Shepherd. Flash of light, puff of smoke, all the lights go out. Cries from the dressing-rooms. Heavy sighs from the ladder. We wait for him to repair the fuse.

When they come up again, Laurie Brownhill is standing alongside cracking his knuckles. "Wotcher, doc. Turned troubadour?"

Enter the Demon King bang on cue. He looked no older but much thinner. I put that down to working for the B.B.C. "Laurie, you whore-monger, what are you doing here?"

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"You said it, doc. How did you guess?" He grinned and gave his knuckles an extra crack. I had known that sound for years. "Heard you were in town, doc. Thought I must see what my little mucker is up to." He sat down next to me. Rather he collapsed with a slamming of the seat and the total subsidence of his long body. I forgot about the lights, I forgot about the play. Here was my favourite villain.

We had served together on the same corvette; he as a one-ringer, I as an ordinary signalman. Both of us were disconsolate. He was undisciplined, ill-adjusted, disliked by his fellow-officers. I was eighteen, precocious and extremely afraid. In the beginning I was also sea-sick. During our second watch together, he started talking about Dostoevsky and Proust. I had never read *Cities of the Plain* and in a night of howling gale and wave-tops I did not mind admitting as much. He was probably trying me out. I discovered later that this was part of his technique, like firing a sighting shot. It was not so much how you responded, but whether you responded at all. Apparently I passed that first test. When my relief came—a taciturn young Hampshire farmer misnamed Speakeasy—Brownhill had given me a lecture on agnosticism, a theory of relativity and two verbatim extracts from *La Prisonnière*. I was exhausted and ill. Dawn was just breaking. The bridge was top-heavy with duffle-coats and caps. I turned to go but he shouted after me, "Who's your mucker, Shepherd?" Stunned I replied, "Haven't got one, sir." "Then use me," he said. "Dare say it's unethical but if you want anything come and see

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me." His voice in my ears was louder than any mine exploding. Mortified beyond bearing I stumbled below and was promptly very sick indeed. The scene was duly exaggerated by my messmates and for several days I went more in terror of Brownhill than of U-boats. But he caught up with me in the end—Laurie always did. He was as sensitive as a rhinoceros and about as self-willed—and after another severe discourse on the Rights of Man, I let him have his head. It didn't take long for the ship's company to accustom itself to this "wonky one-ringer" and—such is the eccentricity of matelots—to raise him to a place in their affections somewhere between "a pint of wallop in the local with the lads" and a refit at Merseyside. He was decorated off Norway but ruined the effect by drinking a bottle of cherry brandy and telling the First Lieutenant his navigation was as rank as his orifice. After the war he joined a Midlands newspaper as a feature writer but after an article on Franco beginning, "We who fought this hydra-headed monster at Barcelona," he was requested to move his typewriter elsewhere. Since then he had been working in the Features Department of the B.B.C., doing many excellent specialist scripts including one on whaling, one on the rise of fascism in South Africa and a third on the Great American Way of Life which had splintered the windows of Grosvenor Square. He was frequently under fire from Right Wing politicians and took added delight in refusing to answer their questions about his relations with the Party. The red tie (which he habitually wore with a yellow chequered

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shirt) was purely utilitarian, he said: it hid the dirt. The same thing could be said of various political organizations, he invariably added.

For all that I was not overpleased to see him. As always I found him too distracting. His big personality with its loud voice, its loud gestures and its equally loud knuckles, left no room for anything else. He was like a giant magnet, directing his strength at will, rendering chaos out of apparent order in his ruthless search for logic.

"Looks like a mermaids' whore-house," he said of the set. "Is that seaweed or tobacco-juice?"

"It is rather an unfortunate colour," I conceded primly. "But it's really the lights which are wrong."

"Ah," he said wisely and then rounded on me with a flourish, cracking a bone in my back. "Well, well, well, doc! Tell me all. What's the scandal? What's the tattle? I want to know everything. Who has the most interesting perversion? Who's sleeping with who? Everything! But first, tell me about this ghastly example of fustian bad taste which you are perambulating about the country."

I explained as well as I could, growing steadily more aware of a bewildered Caliban hovering like a spectre at the footlights. Laurie saw him also and interrupted my narrative to bawl loudly—

"Ha, doc! Who's your little mucker?"

"Name of Caliban," I said guardedly. "My assistant. Now, Laurie—"

"So . . . so." He made a noise like a fog-horn. "Call him down and present him. He has something between his ears which interests me."

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"His eyes?" I asked weakly.

"His eyes!" He bellowed with laughter. "I've got me a winger, doc. It's his mind. A pericranium, a noddle, a pate. Come on down, boy. I shan't eat you."

Caliban's expression reminded me of a small bird hopping in front of a snake; a mixture of terror and an overwhelming fascination. I knew exactly how he was feeling, but he was lucky: he was on a theatre stage, I had been on a ship's bridge in half a gale.

He came down into the stalls and I introduced them warily. "Lambert? Lambert? Knew a music-hall team once called The Happy Lamberts. Any relation?"

"My Dad and Mum," said Caliban and from that moment they got on splendidly. There appeared to be nothing that Laurie did not know about the variety stage. He had met artists in Scunthorpe, Frankfurt and Toledo. He knew a pair of slack-wire performers in Singapore and had watched Daisy King in Bangkok. An impersonation act had caught his eye in Sydney but had fallen off sadly by the time it had reached The Grand, Bulawayo. There were guitarists in Istanbul and pipers in Yanina. A ventriloquist in Graz was heading for big things. A speciality dancer in Kiel had followed him to Kilkenny but got herself married in Morocco.

When he finished speaking, Bert had had his tea, repaired the fuses and Caliban's eyes were standing out like organ stops.

"Well, we'd better get on with the lights," I said defensively.

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"Yes, yes," he breathed, not hearing a word I said and reminding me once again of the small bird and the cobra.

"Lights?" roared Laurie. "All bullsh-t! Play it in candles. Saw a little thing done like that in Marseilles. Interesting place. Near Marie's. *La grande obscénité*. Not the sort of thing for Wigan." But he let us go finally. I could hear him booming away in the dressing-rooms as he met members of the company: "It can't be me old Mither Maire. How are yer, doc? And Sharland, you big —, how's the plastic pose racket? Audrey doc, and Doc. Read any good case histories lately? Did I ever tell you about that girl in Wichita, the one who had a thing about boot-trees? The funny thing was they had to be black. She'd go miles for a really good pair of shiny black boot-trees. Well, it appears one night . . ."

"Take them all out," I said, "and start with your floats at half." I was longing to hear about the girl from Wichita and so was Caliban but somebody had to draw the line somewhere with Laurie.

He came to the first night and afterwards we went out and got very drunk on some explosive new mixture he had invented. It smelled of methylated spirits and had the kick of a jet turbine. Appropriately he called it Whittle's Whistle.

"Terrible show you got here, doc. About as interesting as a Mothers' Tea in Little Peepot. What are you going to do about it?"

"Yes," I said and hiccuped. Bale and Bloggs Minor were, at that moment, as remote as the Milky Way.

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"Got no excitement, got no guts. Went to sleep in the second act and to the gents in the third. It needs a depth-charge under its arse. Talking of depth-charges, have another Whistle."

"Yes," I said and hiccuped again. I was floating between the chimney-pots trying to catch a couplet by Eliot. There were balloons round my feet and feathered wings on my wrists. I was Pavlova doing the Dying Swan, Rubinstein playing the Waltz in A Flat Major. I was Vincent seeing a sun-flower for the first time, Vaughan Williams hearing a lark. Beautiful women sang songs on the floor, clad in black nylon; nubile dancers flitted round my head with limbs like honey, leaping, sinking in a sea of cotton-wool and silver fox. I was Gigli and Sugar Ray Robinson and Rudolf Valentino. I was Kreisler and Rubens and Hemingway in a solar topee. I was so high I was almost Alfred Deller.

He picked me up. "You're drunk," he said, surprised.

There were sequins on his eyelashes and rubies on his cheeks. His voice was liquid gold and his ears were—ivory caskets carved by Ming and Sing. His teeth were pearls, his eyes clearest crystal glass. "Yes," I said.

"Not that I blame you, doc. Give me a show like that to tour and I'd live off a bottle of T.N.T."

"Yes," I said.

"Drink up, doc," he replied sadly. "Bury your sorrows in the bosom of Madame Alcohol."

"Yes," I said.

There was only one man in the world with whom

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I could drink like that. And that was not George Bale or Dicky Sharland or darling Alex Ralph. Nor was it Bloggs Minor or Caliban or Bert the electrician. It was not Robin or Aaron or Stephen Boxer or even Felix (with Aurora Fingelstein). It was Laurie, the dearly beloved, picking me up and filling my tankard and scraping me off the ceiling all with the aid of a bucolic mixture of atoms known as Wishel's Whishel.

The next morning came retribution. My head was a drum in which my unwilling thoughts slithered and stamped about like footballers on ice. Dido, God bless her, was complaining about Sharland.

"Why doesn't he get Paulina to do his mending?" she was saying furiously. "Fancy asking me to darn his filthy old socks. I couldn't care if they fell to bits. In fact I'd raise a cheer. He's got a . . . a châtelaine. Why doesn't he go to her?"

"Doubt if Paulina's wielded a darning needle in these twenty-three years," I mumbled. My throat was being scraped with sandpaper. It felt as raw as a ship's bottom in dry dock. And my eyes were giving trouble. Every time I blinked they threatened to rupture my neck muscles.

"I bet she hasn't." Dido stamped angrily—my head vibrated, enlarged, exploded and subsided tinkling. "The only thing she's ever wielded is a . . . is a—"

"Don't be coarse," I said hurriedly. "Now there's a good girl. Now there's a good girl. I adore you but I do wish you'd run away and bury yourself in the Himalayas or somewhere. You've got a lovely voice and you're projecting like a rocket-firing tank.

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Every syllable is hitting me clear between the eyes. But I can't stand it!"

Immediately she became sympathetic. She was like a little child trying to make amends. I could almost feel the little sticky hand in mine. "Oh, Bas, your poor, poor head. Oh, darling, I am sorry. Come and sit down in your dressing-room. Shall I fetch you some coffee or an aspirin? You have got a temperature I am sure. There, there." She had green eyes which widened innocently. I expected the lisp at any moment. "Would he like a cigarette then? Here, I'll light it for him." I resisted the impulse to spit it out and lay back instead with a groan. "Oh, you poor thing, you do look awful. Are you sure you don't need a doctor? It was that friend of Caliban's, Mr. Brownhill, I suppose."

"Mine," I croaked.

"Pardon?"

"My friend, Mr. Brownhill."

"Well, fancy him treating you like that. Why, he might have killed you."

"I wish he had."

"The idea." She bustled about making more noise than an army on the move. "He ought to know that you're tired and overworked and terribly, terribly run down."

"It was all right while it lasted," I said, determined she was not going to spoil the memory of it for me. "I threw everything overboard. Including the show. It was the perfect dream of a binge."

"You mean you were sick?" A wrinkle appeared between her eyes. She regarded me anxiously.

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"I was. Of course I was," I snapped. "That's the mark of a really good reunion party. But that wasn't what I meant."

"My poor Sebastian." She tilted her head on one side and stared at me with her big tragic green eyes. "And here was I worrying you with my little problems."

"That sounds uncommonly like a cue," I groaned. "All right, let's hear the rest of them."

"But they're nothing," she insisted. "No, no, I couldn't possibly. Your poor head. Why, my little trouble is like a teeny goldfish compared with yours."

"And what is mine?"

"Why, getting us to London, isn't it?"

"That's two of my problems," I said. "You needn't go on."

"Oh, I shan't, I shan't." She wandered away and stood with her back to me, bowed deep in thought. As an actress she was as thoroughbred as Audrey. She stood there waiting for me to play up to her. I sat there waiting for her to wait. Finally she could bear it no longer. She turned with a brisk movement which reminded me of one of our leading actresses dealing with a train, and announced, "Well, if you really want to know, it's Mr. Sharland." The scene was pure Pinero.

I shuddered. "Oh, my God, not again. You're growing so psychopathic about him I'll have to get Stephen to look at you."

She flushed. For a moment I saw Bale explaining about his play and the wife he had lost, then it went. "I don't know what you mean," she said calmly. I

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was right. It was Pinero. Even in her shirt and jeans, she gave the impression of an hour-glass figure and one of those choker neck-bands with lace trimmings. "I find him absolutely disgusting. Do you know . . . do you know that he has people in his dressing-room?"

"*Has?*" I yelped. "What do you mean by *has*? If you mean that he has people in, in the same way that one has people in to tea, I'll say I know. If, on the other hand, you mean 'has' in the sense that a man 'has' a woman, I'll ask what earthly business you think it is of yours?"

I watched her and in the distance I seemed to hear the tinkling of an unusual little bell. And it wasn't the hangover bell either.

"Sebastian . . ." And then I realized what it was. A warning. We had both of us grown deadly serious.

"All right, blast you, darling, I'll speak to him. But I can't see what I can really do about it. It's his life he's messing up, not yours or mine. And now I wish you would leave him alone for a while. He's a very pleasant young man with not many morals but a great deal of talent and a capacity for taking things lightly which I find utterly refreshing. He may not be your kind of man but he's very nice to have around. So just drop him, eh? Take no more notice of him. And now let's call it a day." And then a new thought struck me. It was so obvious I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. It was something the Corduroy Cap had said. Dido had been present at that session also. What did she know and how much was she suspecting?

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If Sharland had been in the theatre when darling Alex had taken the sleeping tablets, there was a good chance that he knew far more about it than any of us. Was Dido thinking of this also or had she forgotten that scene? It was Sharland who had phoned me and Sharland who had told Alex that Liz and I were lunching together that day. So there was a good chance he knew about Liz and me. Or something else. It was the something else which intrigued me, as if Dido had opened another door that I had overlooked.

"Who told you this?" I asked severely. "What proof have you got? Have you been peeking through key-holes?"

"Oh, no. I——" She hesitated. It was the most self-conscious Dido I had ever seen. "The doorkeeper told me last week."

"I see." The doorkeeper again. It was he who had told the Corduroy Cap. "I'm sick to death of this company and its petty scandals," I exploded. "You all behave like schoolkids sucking up to your favourite teacher. What does it matter what Sharland does? Can't you let him have his fun in peace?" I was being less than fair. There was no scandal. Only a little talk about Sharland and some—not much—about me. But it was my conscience doing the talking. "If you object to his ——ing every woman in sight, why don't you tell him so?"

She blanched. Not at the word but at my vehemence. "I thought I ought to tell you," she stammered. Her eyes were downcast. Her whole bearing suggested humility. There was no acting here. This was

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Dido defenceless; shorn of the pirouettes, the sulks, the adolescent daydreams. Suddenly I was sorry. One cannot hit a child and then gloat over its misery. I went to her and put my arm about her shoulders. "Forgive me, darling. I knew not what I was saying. Put it down to Whittle's Whistle."

She sniffed weepily. "I thought you would understand."

"I understand nothing," I said. "Neither you nor me nor any part of this noisy world. For what I said I am duly sorry. I like you very much. I would not knowingly hurt you for anything. Put it down to my hangover. Put it down to my liver. Put it down to the fact that we're in the theatre and in the theatre anything suffers when it comes into my line of fire. You should know that by now. I am three parts antagonism and one part confusion. I rely on you to clear up the last part and help me fight the other three." It was a long speech and I meant every word of it. I kissed her softly on the cheek and caught the aroma of hayfields and summer-time. There was a freshness about her that enslaved me. Perhaps it was her frankness, her defencelessness, her bewilderment. "Forgive me?"

"I think so." She smiled uncertainly. There were tears hesitating on her lashes. Her lips trembled. Suddenly she threw her arms around me and cried, "Oh, Bas, sometimes I'm so unhappy."

So are we all, I thought. So are we all. There is a price on everything and the costliest thing we know is happiness. Most people cannot afford it. Those who have it wonder if it is worth it. I wondered once and

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then I wondered if it had been happiness after all. Who can tell? Not even the philosophers.

She stood within the circle of my arms and wept. At that moment she was utterly naked. There were no barriers between us, no guises, no acts. She was Dido of her mother, born with nothing.

I said, "There'll come a time when you'll remember this. When you'll remember that you cried on my shoulder. Remember it always. It is a big thing. An important thing, Dido. For me also. Laughter and weeping lift us above the plane of things. In them we share a little bit of immortality. They are the only things which make me certain of a God."

After a while she grew calmer. Her sobbing ceased. Her breath came more easily. She drew away and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. I was sorry to see her go. It meant the end of our communion. She sniffed and smiled. "I'm an awful fool sometimes. I don't know what comes over me. But thank you for being so sweet. I shan't do it again."

The barriers were coming up. The guise was being selected. Dido, naked, was clothed again. Already she was seeking the new act to avoid embarrassment. Yet in that moment we had shared something beyond the reach of gestures.

I laughed and said, "Uncle Bas cures all. His magic touch is known to thousands. Number in the phone book. Ring for an appointment. Don't miss the rush."

"I love you, Bas. Thank you."

And with that we were content and went back to the play.

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I was altering the moves and putting in new business. Tentatively at first, later with abandon. It was all experiment; I was trying, almost by a process of elimination, to find the right key to the play. Did it lie in the pace? the atmosphere? the characterization? One thing of which I could be certain: it did not lie in the script. The dramatic, emotional or literary content was non-existent. Whatever had to be done, had to be done in the way of decoration or even camouflage. One had to work in spite of, rather than because of George Bale. He had provided the barest bones for the production. On this skeleton had to be hung the rags of my devising.

By way of a compromise with my more professional self, I attempted to carry out the plan I had suggested the previous Saturday. None of the innovations was to be included (as yet) in a performance of the play, neither were they to be logged in the prompt script. Instead Dido was still instructed to "note them somewhere" so that from one rehearsal to the next we could judge our progress. This had a twofold disadvantage: it kept the production in a fluid state when it should have been setting, and it irritated us all when we should have been easing down into an harmonious team.

At this stage Stephen Boxer was invaluable to us. With a layman's approach, he could frequently cut across some knotty problem which we, more conscious of technical trickery, had brought about. He could talk as a member of the audience, saying what pleased him and what confused. This method of production possesses obvious dangers, but in a company

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such as ours where there was no one person capable of seeing the production as a whole, it did assist us greatly. But after a while even Stephen's perception was dulled and it was Sharland who suggested calling in Laurie Brownhill to help.

It was, I remember, after the Wednesday matinée while we were sitting around a table in the theatre café, rather soggy with gloom.

"He's a damned good writer," he affirmed, "and he's got one of those keen robot-like minds: click on, click off. A searching ray."

"Science fiction," I said. "We don't want a searching ray. We know what is wrong with the play. We just need somebody to tell us how to put it right."

"Bas is right." Audrey nodded. "In short we need a producer."

"I disagree, darling." Sharland bit into his buttered toast and chewed noisily. "I think we need a playwright. Bas can produce. He's done all right up to now but now he can't go any further. I knew that would happen. I told him so. With a play like this you can only go so far and no further. Listen, listen——"

"I am not going to start altering the lines if that's what you want," I said. "It's Bale's play."

"Listen, Bas. I have an exit in the second act. We've altered the moves five or six times. It's an important exit but I still go out as if I were going to spend a penny and don't want to make it too obvious. Now that is wrong and all the production in the world is not going to alter it. I must have an exit line.

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I must have something to *say* which will give me the exit."

"Like 'Make way, unruly woman'," said Dido sarcastically.

Maire cackled. "You'll be a star yet, child. It's that attitude which puts them on top."

Sharland broke off annoyed but swept them away with a gesture. "Do you see what I mean, Bas?"

"I see all right," I said loudly, "but what worries me is the point where we'll stop. All right, so we give you an exit line. Fine. Two lines! The next thing Audrey will want something and so will Caliban. Not because as Maire says, you want to be stars, but because you need it and Bale hasn't given it to you. Right, then we find that a speech is a bit sticky, a scene is a bit too long, so what do we do? Rewrite the speech? Cut the scene?"

"We can be careful," he said moodily.

"How careful? Either you alter a line or you don't. You can't *partly* alter it. Look what happened on Saturday. We played about with the moves of one scene purely as an experiment. Look at us now. I've hacked Aaron's production to shreds. I couldn't have done it more efficiently with an axe."

"It's better," Stephen put in.

"Of course it's better," I replied. "It couldn't have been worse. But the fact is I'm taking quite a big enough chance as the matter stands. If either Felix or Aaron should decide to turn nasty, I could be blackballed for life. Who'd employ a stooge manager with a reputation for sabotage? Not I, sir! That's how I stand. Why should I stick out my neck even further

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by antagonizing Bale? Besides I like him and respect him. I think his play stinks to hell but it is *his*. Not mine. Not Laurie Brownhill's."

They sat for a moment in silence, digesting this with their tea. Before they could reply, I remembered something else——

"And there's another thing. Have you stopped to ask yourselves how we've managed to get as far as we have? I should think not. And yet you know as well as I do it's because darling Alex hasn't been with us. He would *never* have stood for it. It's far more than his reputation is worth. Once a Jesuit always a Jesuit. And when he comes back he'll tell us so."

"When is that?" somebody asked.

"Darling people, on Friday. Liz returns tomorrow."

That shocked them. They sat up looking scared.

"That's what I mean," I went on. "He's not going to like what we've done and he's going to kick up the most awful shindy when he finds out."

They nodded. All except Audrey. She said shrewdly, "Just how big is his reputation? Can he afford *not* to get into the West End?"

"You ask him."

"I shall. You know, I can't quite see where all this talk of rewriting comes from. I gather you've spoken about it before. What I can't understand is why the mere mention of Laurie's name brings the subject up. Can't he just come and see the show and advise on *production*?"

"He's seen it," I said gloomily, "on Monday," thinking of Whittle's Whistle.

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"That's the old version, Aaron's not ours. Why can't he come to a full rehearsal and see what we've done on our own?"

"That's a point, darling!" Sharland was rejuvenated. "You can't object to that, Bas."

I was forced to agree. "Provided he keeps his hands off the script." He had learnt a superficial broadcasting technique; perhaps he could give us some useful ideas.

"I'll phone him up as soon as we go back to the theatre," Dicky promised.

But I need not have worried. Laurie rejected the invitation. "You can stew in your own juice, doc. I've got enough on my plate as it is."

"Now what? Do we give up or go on?" Dicky paced the floor of my dressing-room. The curtain had just come down on one of the worst receptions we had received. At several points there had been indications of booing.

"Go on, of course. We've got to play out Golders Green. After that—well, they can't say we didn't try."

"I suppose so." He sat down unhappily. "I don't really know what's come over this company. What have you done to me, Bas? A week ago I would have spat in your eye if you had dared to suggest this extra work."

"You told me so." I remembered our conversation in the pub. From there it was but a short step to Liz and the fateful telephone call from the theatre.

Even at this late stage I hesitated. My stomach

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seemed to have dropped inches. I said as nonchalantly as I could, "Dicky, there's something I've been meaning to ask you——"

"Uh-huh?"

"—about darling Alex. I heard—they tell me—somebody said you were in the theatre when it happened."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I had left by then."

"But you did see him. How was he?"

"Much the same as usual. Jumpy as a puppet on a string. Stiff as hell. Inclined to be bitchy."

"What did you talk about?" This was the question. On this my life depended—virtually. "The show? Me? Liz?"

"No. Why should we?" He looked genuinely puzzled. I could have kissed him. I could have hugged him. I did none of these things. I lit a cigarette. The smoke seemed to fill the cavity where my stomach should have been. "About this and that. Mainly about that. He was interested in my companion."

"You weren't alone?" The doorkeeper again. ("Has people in his dressing-room." Has? Has?)

"I very rarely am." He smiled mockingly. "What is this, Bas? Third degree? Senator McCarthy? or just maiden prudishness?"

"I don't know." I grinned—with an effort. "I just wondered. Like everybody else I feel . . . vaguely responsible for what happened."

"You needn't. It had nothing to do with you. He didn't know where Liz was that afternoon."

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That made me gulp. So Sharland knew. I stared at him. "How did you find out about that? Liz and me."

"It was obvious—to me." He smiled one of his charming, more irritating smiles. "Set a thief, don't you know? But I still think you were a bloody fool."

"So do I. Now."

"I could have told you from the start it wouldn't work out. Neither for you or Alex. She's like a douche of cold water. That was his trouble. He wanted somebody who could help him, but he chose the wrong woman. Quite the wrong woman. It's hard to say who'd make a good husband for our Liz, an impotent pastor, perhaps. Certainly she was the worst woman in the world for what Alex wanted."

"And what did he want?"

"How blind can you be, Sebastian? A wife. Somebody to teach him the joys of marital bliss." He blew smoke rings at me, smiling.

"I know that." But still I hesitated. I knew the answer was there, lurking in the next puff of smoke. But I did not want to hear it. Suddenly I was feeling sorry for Alex. Too many things were being uncovered, exposed: the officer act, the sudden marriage, the wife on tour, the stiffness, the never-letting-go, the feeling of always having something to hide. It was like stripping a dead body.

Sharland was speaking again. "I'm surprised at you, really surprised, Sebastian. I should have thought you well versed in these things. After all, the Navy. The theatre. Wonderful education. Absolutely unbeatable." He smiled wickedly. But I don't think he was being malicious.

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"I didn't know. I hated him too much to look for excuses."

"We always do. Pity is the last resort and it invariably comes too late. You saw Donald, didn't you? He has the most enchanting smile."

"Your companion?" I remembered the child standing outside the stage door, Dicky's interest, the half-concealed overtures.

"Yes. Do you expect me to apologize?"

"No."

"I will if you like. It so happened I was completely innocent that afternoon. I took him to my dressing-room to give him a note for his mother. I told you about her. She keeps digs. I'm very fond of her. Too fond to try anything with Donald. I'm not a bastard; I'm only a lecher." He paused, regarded his cigarette. "Unfortunately Alex saw us and jumped to the wrong conclusions. He was interested in the boy himself, you see."

"I see."

"Not all, but enough. Donnie knew him. He said there were stories."

"Oh, Christ."

"Are you any happier now?"

"No." And I wasn't. I would far rather have taken all the blame upon myself. But Sharland was right: Pity is the last resort and it always comes too late.

The next morning Liz arrived on the midday train. I could barely bring myself to look at her. I was remembering too much: her apparent hesitation

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and then her willingness—almost enthusiasm—to participate in the experiment in my bedroom. Her cry of, "He's right, he's right, it's not his fault but mine, all mine," and the later, "I had to prove to myself. Will you hate me always?" and my own smug, "We cannot hate. Only God can do that," which capped her appeal.

And yet I could hate. For when I saw her now I found myself thinking venomously, You nearly killed that husband of yours. He looked to you for help. But I was wrong. Even while I was thinking it I knew I was wrong.

It was nobody's fault, not hers, not mine, not Sharland's, not even Alex's. We were all to blame but we could not be blamed.

Audrey greeted her and explained what we were doing and we ran through some of her new moves. She looked tired and ill; I wondered how much she knew, how much Alex had told her. She was not the woman with whom I had discussed Colchester and the precarious, body-snatching business of the theatre. She was a mere remnant of her former self. For all that I could not bring myself to sympathize. When we broke for lunch, I slipped on my coat and left without waiting for the others. When we returned I waited in my dressing-room until they were all assembled on stage. I could not bear the thought of being alone with her. Call it what you will—guilty conscience, wounded vanity or fear—it was there and I could not shake it loose.

Finally she cornered me. Sharland was called to the phone and we stopped for a moment. She

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appeared in the stalls at my side. "Sebastian, I'm afraid I must talk to you."

"Yes, Miss Rudge?" Those lips I had kissed, that body I had explored. She looked like an old, old woman.

"I wanted to tell you that I am leaving the company."

It shocked me, but I cannot say why for it was the logical solution. I should have foreseen it as I should have foreseen so much. But I hadn't and now all I could think to say was, "So you're running away?" which under the circumstances helped not a jot and was besides so unnecessarily cruel.

"I thought you would see it like that, but Alex thinks it's best."

"Are you leaving him also?"

There was no reply to that. Had I really expected one? Time was to bring its own answer but she was not to know that. She just looked at me and I carried on feebly, "So back to Colchester and the regimental reunions. It was a mistake ever to leave them. When are you going?"

"As soon as I hear from Felix. I wrote yesterday."

"Then you won't need to go on with the rehearsal," I said. "We're wasting your time. You won't need the new moves in Colchester. The old ones will do just as well."

She turned away dispirited and for a moment sympathy nearly came. I wanted to go to her and apologize and beg her forgiveness but it was already too late for Sharland had returned and, almost without thinking, I heard myself calling, "Dido, will

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you please continue to read Monica until further notice?"

And then there was nothing for it but to get on with the rehearsal, with the theatre hushed and the doors at the back swinging endlessly. Endlessly.

Chapter Eight

"A POOR thing," said Brownhill, "but mine own. Or nearly mine own. I've left in one or two scenes which didn't bellow for the knife. I thought you would like him to recognize some of it."

"What is it?"

"A dramatic regurgitation entitled *The Wind Breaker* or Halitosis in Hades."

I gaped. "Do you mean *Storm Thunder*?"

"That's right." He cracked his knuckles. "Knew it was vaguely digestive."

"But I don't get it." I noticed Sharland standing beside him, looking unusually ashamed. "Is this some of your work, Dicky?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"My God, what a mess of traitors. So the whole thing was a put-up job: the conference in the café, the phone call, the fact that he had something on his plate. This was it, I suppose."

"Yes, but I didn't know it at the time. I only knew he was working on the prompt script."

"The prompt script? I see!"

"You needn't look so puritanical about it. Your precious Caliban was taking it to him after rehearsals."

"Caliban, too? What is this? You bunch of treacherous sods. You'd cut my throat with my own razor."

"What's it matter?" Brownhill broke in. "You

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wanted a West End vehicle and I've given you one. Aren't you satisfied yet? B' Jesus, doc, you're even more pi now than you were in H.M. Services. Pull out, smile a little. That's a new-born babe you're holding in your hands there."

"Drop dead, Laurie. I wouldn't expect either of you to understand. It's a matter of principle with me."

"Principle, get him!" He belched loudly. "That to your principle. People talk more nonsense about principle than about anything else and Cor! look where it's got us. They make wars for principles, doc, my son, and have religious persecutions, purges, blood baths all for the same reason. Dachau was built for a principle, so was Changi and the electric chair. They hang men for a principle or burn them with napalm bombs. Principle! You talk like a schoolgirl with frilly drawers. Stuff it, doc, you can't do anything useful with it."

I could have hit him. He was an old friend, a respected friend but I hated him for that. Beneath the idealism, beneath the fear, I could feel that he was partly right. But only partly. That did not help. Instead it filled me with a lonely, bitter, frustrated fury.

I left them standing there, staring after me. I wanted to break something. I was filled with rage that they could have done this to me. Caliban was leaving the prop-room. I hissed at him, melodramatically, "Judas!" and felt some slight satisfaction at seeing the colour drain from his face.

"Why, Mr. Shepherd, what's the matter?"

"*The matter!*" I stared at him. "You ask *me*?"

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He caught sight of the script in my hand and faltered. "Oh, dear, so they've told you."

"You recognize it, do you?"

"Mr. Shepherd . . . I . . . surely . . ."

"Oh, go to blazes," I snarled. "I thought I could trust you."

Outside in the street I found myself longing to run away; to leave the responsibility to someone else; to let them do any damned play they chose. This I hadn't asked for.

Cars were streaming away from the cinemas. Crowds were jostling amicably along the pavements. Long queues tapered from the tram stops. My anger fell away as quickly as it had risen. Not for the first time was I made aware of the insularity of the theatre. Here was the real world and here was our audience. Yet the majority had never been to a theatre except at Christmas-time while ninety-nine per cent of them had never even heard of *Storm Thunder*. For what possible reason did we allow ourselves to get so worked up about it? Was it all just sheer vanity?

Taxis were hooting and drunks were calling from the pubs. A man shouted, a tram rattled down the street. The queues sighed, stretched themselves, moved forward.

Here was our audience. These were the people who mattered. And they were as unconcerned as pebbles on the beach, jellyfish.

Brownhill was right. Nobody would care who wrote *Storm Thunder*. George Bale, the posters would say; but he was only another name—something more

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like theirs than Jean-Paul Sartre or Tennessee Williams. George Bale. Anybody could be a George Bale. What did principle matter? Ask any of these people. Ask this man here, with his cloth cap and his missus hanging on his arm, "What should I do?" and he'd answer, "Please yourself, lad." Ask these two girls leaving a fish-bar pecking at newspaper and they'd only giggle and say, "We never go to the theatre; we prefer the pictures." So whom would my principle affect? Not a soul. Not a blasted soul. Except Bale.

Except Bale.

And who was Bale? A schoolmaster to whom I had grown attached because of a story about a dead wife and a small boy, whom, for reasons of derision, I called Bloggs Minor. Why should I have principles about Bale? I'd had none concerning Alex and *his* wife. What are these principles? Do I switch them on as casually as I switch on the O.P. spot? Do I swivel them round to suit myself or have I a particular plot, a code of living?

I went into a pub and asked for a brandy. They were just closing and refused to give it to me. I left again.

So where do we go from here? Do we take the script Brownhill has written and give it a try or do we plough on with Bale's blunt weapon, knowing how hopeless the position is? Principle: is it only another name for playing safe, saving face? Would Bale really object if I took over someone else's script and had the play accepted in the West End? Would he thank me if I said no, and let the company, the school and his wife crash in a dead-weight at Golders Green?

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I could ask him. I could write and say, "Somebody else has written a play. If you like we'll call it *Storm Thunder* and produce it in place of yours." Would he like that?

What was principle and had it anything to do with the theatre? What was integrity and where in the world of Art does one find it? Tennent Productions can afford it and so can the Arts Council. But Urban Tours? Don't make me laugh. What was especially honest about Felix or Aaron or even Robin? They were all out for themselves, making their own bunks more comfortable. What was so admirable about Uncle Frank or Aunt Victoria that I should respect honesty in the theatre? Would Dido thank me, and Caliban and Maire if I dropped the play down the sink after all their weeks of work?

I stood at a tram stop. Shuffled forward. Gave someone a light and left again.

Who would profit by my principle? Not a soul. Not a soul. Even myself. God knows I could do with a long run at a West End salary. It would be the making of Audrey, Dicky Sharland, even darling Alex. It was the chance we were all waiting for.

And Laurie? He wouldn't mind. He had written the script behind my back, to please me. There would be no question of Bale's surrendering his rights, even of royalties. He'd want the play to succeed for our sakes.

Then where was this principle I raved about? The more I pursued it, the more it eluded me. Could it not be—fear? Fear of risking my chances even further; I had told Sharland that. Fear of finding

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out too late that I lacked the appropriate authority. Oh, yes, the Revelation Players had taught me a lot. The story I had related to Bale in the Lyons emporium was being enacted again and again. Responsibility and authority. The striving and the failing. The passionate fear of letting them down. The set-up and the strike.

Could I send the script to Bale? Could I say, "Here, this is what we want. Write some of it into your own play"? Could I? And would that be any more honest than what Sharland wanted me to do? Could I say to Aaron, "Here, this is what we have done with your production. We thought it so much better"? Could I? And would that be any more honest than what I had already done? And time, time was against us. We had one full week left before Golders Green. If we adopted Brownhill's script we ought to start rehearsing tomorrow.

Tomorrow. And darling Alex returns.

Ye Gods, and what happens then? What does he know about Liz and me? What will he say when he sees the new moves, the new business, the wholesale re-production I've done? Will he object? Will he make a fuss? Will he phone Aaron and Felix and have my head off the block? My head? Bale's as well rests with mine. And Dido's, Caliban's, Audrey's and Sharland's. They all rest with mine—

*Upon the king!—let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives, our children, and
Our sins lay on the king!—*

Mine was the decision. Mine the responsibility.

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I reached my digs and went upstairs. A foolscap envelope lay on my table. It was a letter from Bale. He told me about the school and Bloggs Minor and enclosed fourteen pages of revisions. After I had read them, I took them and dropped them in the fire.

I undressed and climbed into bed. I arranged the pillows and read through Brownhill's script. When I turned off the light I knew he had performed the miracle we wanted.

Sharland said, "Did you like it?" and I said, "Like it? Of course I liked it. It was the play Bale ought to have written in the first place." And it was. Laurie had taken the situation and made a drama out of it; not a great play but a good play, good theatre; the sort of play which holds its audience and blinds them to the improbabilities of the plot. The sort of play which runs for years and becomes a money-spinner for every rep company in the country. The sort of play which would have set Bale atop the Coliseum globe with plenty of room to dangle his legs. "But we can't use it."

"What! Not any of it?" He was amazed. He had obviously relied on the script to break down my remaining scruples. "But there's wonderful stuff in it."

"We'll use your exit line and the cut in the third act. That's all."

"You're potty!" He waved his hands and stamped in exasperation. "Why, fool, we'd have every manager in London eating out of our hand!"

"And Felix?"

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"He'd be in clover. He hasn't had a real success in five years!"

"It's not the play he signed for."

"He should worry. Sebastian, don't you see? Whoever objected to money in the pocket?"

"Come on stage. We'll fight it out with the company."

They were all waiting for me. I told them what had happened. I said Brownhill had written a play which was every actor's dream of bliss. I told them everything, making them understand that here at long last was our salvation. Then I said we weren't going to use it. I wanted to watch their faces. Nothing happened. Not a thing. I suppose they had been expecting me to say that. They had probably stayed up all night, steeling themselves for the disappointment. I asked for their opinions.

Audrey said, "You're the boss, Bas," and rubbed out her cigarette. Maire said, "It seems a shame but I see your point, dear," and picked up her knitting. Caliban and Dido were motionless. All of which did not help me one little scrap. "Upon the king. Let all decisions rest upon the king." Well, that was my decision. But I was as undecided as a loiterer faced with a sunny Sunday afternoon.

Audrey asked, "Can we read it?"—"Yes, with pleasure," and Maire said, "Is it worth it?" and Dido said, "Surely that will make us more dissatisfied." I could have hugged her. I longed for dissatisfaction. If the truth be told, I wanted them to become so dissatisfied, they would compel me to do the new script.

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Caliban muttered, "I think it's awfully good, really," and subsided, remembering his part in the conspiracy. Maire added, "Of course, it may give us some good ideas," and poked at her spectacles. Sharland groaned, "It's such a rotten waste."

I said, "I want to start now from Dicky's exit in the second act. He's got a single new line. I think it ought to be quite effective."

We cleared the stage and ran through the scene. Then I went down into the stalls to watch. It was wonderful. It was unrecognizable. It was like watching a real play with real actors; as if someone had washed the window between stage and auditorium; as if some of the characters had actually taken the trouble to come alive.

I shouted, "It's much better. Yes, we'll keep that. Can you do it once more to get it quite set?"

Dicky shaded his eyes from the footlights. "There's someone sitting in the circle," he called.

I swung round, thinking, Aaron, Robin—

"It's Alex."

"Alex!"

He waved self-consciously. I could see the blurr half-way up the circle.

"Come on down," sang Dicky. "Come say hullo, dear."

He came down the aisle, walking unsteadily. He looked pale and shaky. We greeted him effusively and he responded diffidently, rather awkwardly. "Embarrassment was prominent in every gesture.

"That looked very fine, Bas. You must have been working hard to make such an improvement."

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I grinned modestly. Inwardly I was thinking, How is he going to take this? Will he object or will he join in?

He had changed completely. The slap-on-the-back-old-boy attitude had gone, so had the bitterness I had seen in the hospital. He was as tentative as the early George Bale. My hopes began to rise. But one could never tell with him. "We're very pleased to see you, Alex," I said as sincerely as I could. "I'm getting so balled up with Storm you can have your dressing-room as soon as you like." That might have been tactless. The reference was not a happy one. I waited. But he only smiled.

"I believe you're very good, Bas. It's the sort of part you ought to play."

I wondered what he meant but decided not to ask. There are times when the most barbed replies can be overlooked.

Audrey made him sit down and Maire suddenly decided it was time for coffee. Dido, hovering uncertainly, offered to fetch a tray and almost immediately the conversation died.

"Tell me about the play," he said at last. "*Have* you been working hard?"

They left it to me as I knew they would. Sharland turned away and Audrey smiled apologetically. I swallowed and said, "In a way. I've done quite a lot of tightening up. I've . . . er . . . rearranged some of Aaron's business."

Not a muscle in his face moved. He said quietly, "Yes, Liz told me. She said it made an enormous difference."

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"I think it does." Liz of course. She had known all along. Naturally she would be bound to tell him. "I hope you don't mind, Alex."

"I? Why should I?"

"Well, it's strictly unprofessional. Of course, I haven't forced anybody to take the new moves. And I've only altered where I thought it strictly necessary."

"Unprofessional? I suppose it is really." He smiled. "What is professionalism, Bas? Surely the art of getting the very best out of your work."

"Yes . . . but Aaron wouldn't like it."

"Aaron isn't here." He paused and regarded me kindly. "How did they work out?"

"What?"

"The new moves."

"Well, I think. Naturally we haven't used them in performance yet. I'm still experimenting."

"Experimenting? It's rather late in the day for that. Shouldn't you be trying them on an audience?" He looked at Audrey, Sharland, Maire. "There's only a week left."

I couldn't believe my ears. Neither could they. We just sat there, staring at him.

"Yes, I suppose so," Dicky stuttered.

"We thought we ought to get Aaron's permission first," Audrey explained.

"But is he interested? And after all, you're only wasting your time experimenting with moves that may or may not be good."

"Oh, I agree absolutely," I cried. "But it's taking an awful chance, Alex."

"I suppose it is. Yes, I suppose it is." He had aged

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immeasurably. Perhaps it was only his fatigue; perhaps only his unexpected behaviour. His lack of surprise I could understand: Liz had warned him. But this lack of fight I had not expected. And yet in its own way, it was comprehensible. He had come through his own private hell and anybody who could survive suicide could survive the petty trivialities surrounding *Storm Thunder*. Why should he grow concerned over professional or unprofessional principles when with one swift stroke he had attempted to outlaw the world? In the long run, what mattered the play, George Bale or Aaron?

"But if that little scene I saw from the circle was any indication, I think it's a chance worth taking."

One could see the change in that single sentence; the irrevocable change in values. Of all people Alex had abandoned the theatre. He would not have spoken like that a year ago, a month ago. His attitude was almost that of the layman. This change took us completely by surprise and for a while we did not know how to cope with it. It was as if the puppet-master had redesigned the doll in the middle of the performance, on totally unexpected lines; we, the audience, recognized him only by his name. Our old conceptions of his character went for absolutely nothing. At the same time one was aware of a new disquieting thought which, if anything, complicated one's reactions still further. How much of the new Alex was, in fact, new? Could not the old doll have been the sham; the one we criticized and judged? ~

I said guardedly, "We *could* try it. Say for one performance."

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He shook his head gently. "No, no, Bas. That's not the idea. One performance is only a start. You'll have to go on experimenting, changing, trying each new idea on an audience. Only that way can you estimate your progress. Don't you agree?" to the company.

They did not answer. Dicky nodded vaguely and Audrey bit her lip. But they were too confused to commit themselves vocally. So I was forced to defend myself. I said loudly, "I entirely agree. But what about Aaron, Alex?"

"You haven't written to him?"

"No."

"You should have. And Felix. Now it's a question of time."

"I suppose I could phone," I suggested reluctantly.

We sat for a while thinking of the telephone: we did not want to be told we could not do it; we did not even want to give anybody that opportunity. As long as we were working in secret, we felt there was hope. We feared that one bad-tempered word from Aaron, that flustered lisp from Felix which would wreck everything.

Alex nodded. "I think you'd better," he said.

Naturally he would be the one to say that. He had just come out of a nursing-home. His world was no longer our world. He knew little of our tensions, our fears. His own had absorbed him completely.

"Yes, I shall," I promised. Audrey sighed and Maire slipped a hand over mine. "Don't worry, dear. We're behind you. Aaron will understand."

But would he? I doubted that. Aaron had been

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producing these plays for years. He had developed his own pattern of which he was exceedingly jealous. It was more than the phrase: *produced by Aaron Moran*, more even than the notices. It was the pride in his own technique. As far as he was concerned his production of *Storm Thunder* was the best possible and it was obvious that no amount of verbal pleading would alter his opinion. The only way to do it *was to do it*; to present him with the finished article, beyond the reach of reasoning and arguing, beyond almost the reach of recrimination. Because what we were doing was almost too important for recrimination. Not that the legal aspect worried me at all. (I was already sentenced in that court.) No, it was the personal side which concerned me.

Nobody can tell with theatre. Audiences vary from one town to the next, from one performance to the next. Who was to say that Aaron was not perfectly right in his opinion? that his production was not the best possible? Not I, sir. For all I knew I might have been decreasing the chances of success, not improving them. Useless then to say, "I'm sorry. I see now I shouldn't have done it." Useless then to expect gratitude, to hear them say, "Don't worry, Bas, you did it with our approval." Useless then to go to Bale and plead, "I was only trying to help you because I like you and respect you for all the fine things you've said to me." Useless indeed.

And that alone was one reason why I should have phoned. I should have shared that responsibility of choice with somebody further up. For we were not in it all together. The company was behind me

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not with me. Mine was the decision, mine the guilt.

And still I wasted time hesitating, hoping that somebody would find the way out. And eventually Alex did.

"Look," he said, "here is my suggestion. Let me have another night out tonight, Bas. Let me sit in front. Do all your new moves and business. Put it all in and we'll see. If the house throws tomatoes, we'll drop the whole idea. If they cheer (if they even clap) we'll think again. Until then—no letters, no phone calls. What do you think of that?"

It was a reprieve. We agreed timorously. The idea of presenting our production was still rather overwhelming.

And then Fate questioned our decision. I was called to the phone. It was Robin. Now my heart sank. Aaron I could have told. Felix I could have told. Robin I could not. I respected his confidence in me too much for that. It was little enough but sufficient to make me feel like a traitor. Robin was my one real friend in the theatre. Whatever satisfaction I found in my work, I found through him, through his comments, his advice, his criticism. He would never have behaved like this. He would never forgive me when he found out what I was doing. So I let it slide.

He wanted to tell me about Covent Garden. He had been awarded the job. I knew it was what he longed for and for a moment I was able to talk sincerely. Then he asked about Alex and I could feel the shutter fall on my tongue. I said he was back but

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that I was playing for him again that night. All the time I was like a man with a bad tooth. I spoke round the subject, not daring to take any chances, yet longing to have it ripped out. I asked about Liz and he said that Felix had decided not to release her with only two weeks of the tour to run. Then he added that he had had a letter from George Bale saying what a good stage manager I was and how hard I was working for the success of the show. "So I've decided I'd better stay down here with the new show. I always knew I could trust you, Bas."

After that, the conversation languished. I replaced the receiver and went back to the rehearsal. When they asked if I had told him, I didn't even have the heart to lie.

The first act went well, the second dragged. The third was the most exciting thing I had seen since *The Consul*. This was partly due to the moves and partly to our state of mind, but mainly to the fact that half the dialogue had been written by Laurie Brownhill. This had been used without my knowledge; Sharland had merely taken things into his own hands. But there was nothing I could do with the curtain up and an audience, for the first time, prepared to laugh or gasp or both.

Dicky played beautifully, managing to combine the chief characteristics of both the Bale and Brownhill villains and although some of his speeches wandered with the surprising inconsequence of organ voluntaries, he invariably returned to give some sort

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of cue in the end. When the curtain fell I could not make up my mind whether to hug him or beat him with a stage-brace. For all that, the triumph was really Laurie's. Dicky's was merely the virtuosity.

We changed in a dream, wandering from dressing-room to dressing-room, clutching our towels and rubbing our faces excitedly. The air was filled with congratulations and exhortations: "Did you notice the laugh I got on such-and-such a line?"—"The last scene came over magnificently, darling. I've never seen you so good."—"The business with the lamp occurred to me just before I did it. I don't know. It seemed so right."—"Oh, it was, it was." And it was. That was the important thing. This was no ordinary first night where the compliments are as empty as discarded Christmas wrappers. This was genuine. We were all in the company and could recognize the improvement.

Afterwards we went across the road to Alex's pub where we were joined by an exultant Laurie and poured pints of bitter down our throats, making ourselves very merry and optimistic toasting the new London success, *Storm Thunder*.

Then came the mellow period, the slightly floating sensation of maudlin good fellowship. . . . We had all come through so much together . . . Dicky had been so clever . . . Alex was a real darling after all . . . we deserved to win through . . . together we'd do it . . . I had never had such a company . . . they had never had such a stage manager . . . and so on and so on.

When the pub eventually threw us out we had

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sworn oaths of direst loyalty. The street lamps waltzed across the sky, Caliban stood on his head and Maire sang "Abide with me" giggling and weeping and poking at her spectacles. Dido and Dicky had a hopping race down the gutter and Audrey and I did the love-duet from *The Dancing Years* in memory of Ivor and countless other things which seemed almost unbearable at the time.

And yet it was more than a drunken evening, more than a hectic debauch. We were the hopeless cripples walking again; the criminals exonerated. We were peace after war and sunshine after rain and comforting sleep at last under cosy eiderdowns while beyond the windows winter glittered and snow fell endlessly. Endlessly.

I was overwhelmed by a great sense of freedom. I had proved myself. I had beaten the hated enemies. Sir Frank lay underfoot, a defeated dragon, slain with frustration and futility. Boldly I had shown what a strong heart could do. Bale would be vindicated and so would I. Hope fluttered aloft, a new burgee. The horizon stood to be conquered.

Then came immense lassitude and loneliness as if the ship had slid into a trough between the waves. I remembered Alex's new indifference and was engulfed in a world of night. I was sailing alone. No other figure watched with me. The loneliness was immeasurable, terrifying. For all things considered, what did the show matter? In the general scheme of things, it was less than one bubble of spray, one particle of dust. And we, the components, were even less than that.

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A tram lifted past, pitching and rolling. I was filled with a longing for Dolney and Shepherd's Cave where we had bathed as boys, serene in the world of the minute, enclosed behind glass, seen but untouched, suspended on the unbreakable cords of certainty. Life seemed so much more than a ship to be sailed, a show to be played. It was as abstract as eternity, as uncontrollable as the universe.

We came together in that desolation like two travellers arriving at a single point. There was nothing behind our encounter but a sudden fear, a vast clutching relief, a flood tide of love. I remember her face, seen as if for the first time, lifted in the light of the misted street lamps, the green eyes large with wonder, the childish movement of her head when I took her in my arms and held her close to me. Once before I had held her like this to comfort some adolescent tantrum and felt her as an entity within myself, defenceless and bewildered. Once before I had kissed her on the cheek and experienced the freshness which emanated from her. Now I kissed her on the mouth and tasted so much more.

I remember her room and the washing hung up to dry, the twin beds and my sudden fear that her brother would return to find me there. I remember her passionate reassurances and the sudden awkwardness as we stood and looked at one another. I remember her fumbling movements with her belt and shirt; how one button seemed fastened down with glue or solder, a continual frustration. I remember the exact instant I saw her for the first time, a child, infinitely lovely, to be caressed. I

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remember the tenderness of her throat, the round swellings of her breasts, the softness of her thighs enclosed within the bony cage. I remember her sighs and her one harsh cry and her tears and her endless tremors of passion.

But apart from all that, I remember far too little of that evening.

When I read through what I have just written I feel I must have been born howling, an unwilling child, for strangely I still seem an unwilling adult. And yet they say that is how we all feel when the world grows too much for us. Who was it who explained the sex-urge as the desire to be unborn again?

When I awoke she had gone. Her jeans and her shirt had disappeared, her lumber-jacket had vanished. Caliban lay snoring on the other bed, dressed as I remembered him the night before. His face looked grey and sick against the tumbled pillow.

I dressed myself. Beyond the windows the rain fell, filling the room with a gentle soughing as of a crowd murmuring at a distance. Inside the light was dim, bleak, stone-coloured, reminding me of graveyards or subterranean tombs. I had to fumble my way out of the house and back across the town to my own digs.

That morning I avoided the theatre. I knew Sharland and Alex were waiting for a decision regarding the Brownhill script but I felt beyond any further kind of decision. The play was as insignificant to me

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as the labels on my suitcase, the laces in my shoes. My whole being was caught up with what had happened the night before. Yet I was not in love with Dido. That excuse would have been too easy, although my affections for her had quickened to a state of near-love, a passionate awareness of her, and I willingly found myself thinking with gratitude and awe of what had happened the previous night. No, I was more concerned with her attitude towards me, praying almost that she would not regret what had taken place between us and so force me to follow suit.

At midday I dressed and went down to prepare for the matinée. The stage was in darkness, the theatre silent. I tiptoed to the footlights and gazed across the empty rows and once again fell victim to the tangible presence of the invisible host of players. This time it took the form not of fear but of excitement. I felt buoyed up and clearly without any further doubt that the theatre, here and now, was my background, my religion, my life. I cannot explain it. I saw no visions, heard no voices and yet I *knew* immediately, and distinctly, that despite my struggles I should never escape it. I was even conscious of pleasure at the thought; of pride, as if by the very act of standing there alone, I were linking hands with the invisible company, past and present, great and small. I imagined myself one with Gielgud, one with Irving; one with Sir Frank, one with Magnus. The succulent and the starving, the successful and the struggling. That minute episode, containing within its boundaries an almost limitless emotion, was to prove itself in due course.

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She was the first to arrive. When her laughter echoed from the stage door, my heart sang. There was no more to it than that, but I knew it was all right. She took me to the prop-room and told me why she had run away; how she had heard Caliban stumbling up the stairs in the early hours, how she had dressed quickly, had told him how I had passed out while seeing her home, how she had dozed in the armchair and then gone out to walk in the rain through the deserted streets.

I caught no deceit in her voice. She looked quite sincere. It was only afterwards, only after Caliban had called the half and we were made-up and standing in the wings and I had asked her to come home with me after the *matinée*, that I felt the first sly tug of disquiet.

When I came out of the stage door and walked down the street, there was a cold wind blowing and people were scuttling between the shops like refugees in an air raid. The Town Hall clock struck the half-hour and somewhere a baby wailed, a lost lonely sound, thrown up against a blank wall. The light was fading, giving way to coldness, dim and damp like the coldness under the sea.

I turned up my collar and walked before the wind. I wanted to forget what Dido had said but her words still rang in my ears, somehow confused with the chiming of the clock and the wailing of the child. Newspaper flapped about my feet and a car sighed past, its headlamps throwing pools of wet water-

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colour across the road. There was so much I wanted to do, so much I wished I had not done.

It was Sharland.

"You see, I love him," she had said.

I held her hands and looked at her, bewildered. "But you can't, darling. You've always hated him. You've always said so, Dido."

She did not move away. "I hate him for what he's doing to himself. For Paulina and all the other things. But I don't hate him. Not him." She was facing me with the frankness of a child. Her hands were trembling but her eyes were steady.

"But I don't understand. What about last night?"

"Oh, Bas, I was so happy and you looked so lonely. And I wanted something, something that would make me feel closer to him." She asked, "Was it so very wrong?"

"But he asked you to sleep with him. You said so," I accused. "You were positively livid."

"I know. So would you have been. Don't you see why? It meant nothing to him. Nothing at all. After a night he would have forgotten me and I don't think I could bear that. But I wanted to. Oh, Bas, I wanted to so much."

"Dido, darling."

"You see, I love him madly. I want to give him everything. Oh, I've tried to forget him, I've tried and tried but it's no use. He's always there. I'm always seeing him, I always remember the things he says: the funny things, the dirty things, even the horrid things he shouts at me when he's angry. They're all him and I hate him and love him all

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together because underneath he's kind and clever and ever so understanding. And he wastes himself. He won't work and he runs after Paulina and women . . . and . . . doesn't notice me."

Poor Dido. I remembered the child pirouetting on the stage. I remembered her weeping in the prop-room and flouncing out of the snack bar; snapping at him when he didn't rehearse; refusing to darn his socks; calling Paulina his *châtelaine*; hopping with him down the gutter.

"And now?"

"I don't know really."

It would never be the same again. I have told you, her silence cried, and now my secret is as open as a ruin. People will wander through like trippers, examining, fingering the souvenirs, asking questions and I'll answer brightly but inside I'll know it will never be the same again.

"I had no idea," I said and my words fell flatly like hammer-blows nailing up the door behind the secret. Now you know. Now all the world knows. Now it will never be the same again.

Poor Dido. The communion was over. I could stretch out a hand and touch her but I could not reach *her*. She had withdrawn, aware of the strangeness which confessions bring. The walls are down and the city has fallen. Bring soldiers, bring pity, bring your tears but it'll never be the same again.

"I felt I ought to tell you, Bas. It seems unfair otherwise. And when you asked me to come home with you, I thought you ought to know. I didn't want to hurt you. I like you. I like you so much

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more than Caliban. I wish I loved you. If there was a way by which you could make people love you, I'd try it . . . I'll . . . I'll share digs with you next week if you like. But, but I don't love you. I love him."

I hesitated and then touched her cheek tenderly. "Does he know?"

"Oh, God, no!" and that hurt. For in that cry she grew up; of all things despair is the surest sign of growing up; no girl would have used that phrase.

And then I shivered and turned away, thinking of the child I had held in my arms.

Chapter Nine

BALE wrote: "As you didn't say anything about the revisions I sent last week, I assume you did not think too highly of them. Please let me know. In the meantime if you think *you* can do anything with them, by all means go ahead. I have been meaning to tell you this for some time but hesitated in case you thought it unprofessional. After all, I am the author of the play, you would say; I can just see you saying it. But as time is now short and you are obviously not satisfied, I should deeply appreciate your help."

There was a lot more, about the excitement at school, about a party of boys including Bloggs Minor who were to see the first night at Golders Green and about Alex, but that was the gist of it. The Grand Award of the Green Light.

I took it on stage where Caliban was setting up.

"Where is Dicky Sharland?"—"In the dressing-rooms with Mr. Ralph. I think they were looking for you, Mr. Shepherd."—"Thanks," I walked away but he called me back.—"Mr. Shepherd!"—"Yes?"—"You know, I've had an idea about the set. I hope you won't mind. Do you remember the flat I smashed when it all fell over——?"

"Can I ever forget?"

"—I wondered if we could change it round so that

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it stood further up stage. It would be in shadow there and you wouldn't see the patch."

"*Et tu, Brute?*"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A Latin phrase meaning, And now we redesign the set."

He flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Perhaps we'd better leave it as it is."—"Perhaps not. What difference would it make at this stage?"

He misunderstood. "Well, it would bring the door four feet further down. I don't know if you would like that. Mr. Sharland was saying you were rather cramped in that corner."

"Mr. Sharland was quite right. And with these new moves it's a great pity we can't have a new set to suit. Perhaps we ought to repaint it."—"Repaint it?"—"Change them round and see," I said. "I'm just off to commit moral suicide."

I found Laurie in Alex's dressing-room. "Hullo, doc, my cock. You look like a Medusa."—"Hullo, yourself. I feel like one. When did you get here, beehive?" I handed the letter to Alex. "This was waiting for me in the manager's office. Call it the Decree of Emancipation. Call me Abraham Lincoln. Call me madam. Now let me go away and shoot myself in peace."

"How did you manage it?"

"I didn't blackmail him, if that's what you mean. He did it of his own free will. By the way, Laurie, is there such a thing these days? You see," I concluded bitterly, "he trusts me. So does Robin. They think I

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am protecting their interests. It just shows you how wrong people can be."

"Well, it gives you permission. That's the main thing," said Sharland. "Now we can go right ahead."

"Personally I think we ought to make a clean sweep of it. Can't we do *Aladdin* instead? I'd be type-cast for an old lamp. Just rub me up and throw me out."—"Don't talk nonsense, Bas. How far do you think we can go?"—"How far do you want to go? The whole hog, I should think. A quaint expression. Is it connected with the pig in the poke——?"

"Listen, Bas, you must agree that it's better this way."

"Of course it's better. It's a fine little play now—in fact it's too fine for our dreary company. You actors will have to pull your socks up. And I can't bear to think what Liz is going to do with her two beautiful new speeches tomorrow night. She's like a virgin in a horsehair blanket as it is."

"That's enough of that," Alex snapped, and Sharland said wearily, "Do shut up, Sebastian," so I let them go ahead.

I was as eager as anybody that the play should be a success. I hated raising these objections. Bale was my friend. He'd given me permission to work on his play. Why then, let's go ahead. It was the merest shame that Brownhill had written a new play bearing but the slightest resemblance to *Storm Thunder*.

I went back on stage. Caliban had changed the flats. The result was better. Of course it was better. I might have known it would be. It was the way the set ought to have been designed in the first place.

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Christ, this was a company of genius. We knew all the answers, had all the clues. We wrote plays and produced them and acted them and designed the sets—why, we were just as good as Puddlethorpe Rep, Stick Under Wartnose. We couldn't make a mistake. Not one. Except the small one that we might not be as good as we thought we were.

Liz was standing in the wings, prompt side. I looked at her and she looked at me. So I turned away.

Dido was standing in the wings, opposite prompt. I looked at her and she looked at me. So I stood where I was. A thorn between two roses.

Caliban said, "Shall I set small props? Are you going to light tonight?"

"By all means go ahead. Don't ask me. I'm playing twelfth man in this match. Go ahead. It's not the slightest bit unprofessional."

He stared. "Are you all right, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Me? I'm fine. I swallowed a gnat and it turned out to be a hippopotamus. But apart from that I'm fine." I solved the difficulty eventually by creeping up stage and sliding out of the hall door. Then I tripped over a brace and banged my head against a Mr. Strand flood, beautifully situated with hot and cold running lights.

Followed confusion. Laurie cracking his knuckles, chewing his pipe. (He never smoked. He just chewed. He claimed he could get through the toughest stem in five days flat.) Alex producing and Dicky rehearsing. Say a line—no, no, wait a minute; now say it again—no, no, cut it. Now try again—no, no, rewrite it. Let's have it this way. Let's have it that

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way. Let's have it any way. Let's not have it at all. Three surgeons rampant, cutting up a dead body, trying to make it walk again. Sewing bits on here, taking bits off there, putting the whole lot through a mincing machine and joining it together with cellotape. Cutting out a shape for the head (snip) and the arms (snip, snip) and the dénouement (snip, snip, snip). Arguing ("You should have done it the way I said"), cooing ("Yes, you were quite right"), bullying ("No, no, no!"). Now cut it up here and take a tuck in there and stitch it up along the arrows and iron it out and hammer it into shape and jump on it and spit on it and make love to it. Giving the drooping old bag a face-lift ("Quicker, quicker"), a mud-pack ("Croon it"), a dose of monkey-glands ("Snarl it!"), trying to make it look like Shaftesbury Avenue '54 and not Poodlefaking '04. Putting it on its feet and brushing its coat and smoothing its hair and knocking it down. Then gloating over its bruises. ("It was better the way I said it first."—"Yes, try it like that again."—"Perhaps if we joined the speeches.") Try it this way, try it that way. Start from the beginning, start from the end. Don't start at all. Plays Abandoned. Plays Adopted. Plays Rewritten. Send us all your discarded brain-children. Nothing too difficult, too sordid, too hackneyed. Leave it to us. We'll bring them out just like new, sticking them together (using the original paper) and stringing your name in fairy lights from the Lyric to the Palace with enough left over for St. Martin's Lane and the nether end of Hammersmith. Lights! If all the rejects in all the world were burned simul-

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taneously to provide fuel for one generator, sufficient energy would be produced to light a single lamp on a single playwright. Legend: A thousand Bales, one Fry; two Frys, one Shaw; fifty Shaws, one Bard. Problem: why should three men try to make one Bale? answer in Shaws and fractions of a Bard. Give up? Never say die and so do I. And all the time I stood there laughing, watching them carve up my future and my past and my Present Indicative as well. Until I couldn't bear it any longer and crept away and drew dirty pictures in the prompt copy until they were ready for me to light.

Liz came. I was too tired to run. No longer certain where I could run to. She said, "Can't you stop them? You don't like it, do you?"

I said, "I can't stop them because I think it's necessary. Even if I don't think it's right."

"But it's *his* play." I could tell from her voice she was talking of Bale. He had that effect on people; they half-sighed the name. It was as if they saw him as a Mr. Everyman with the dedicated faith of a Joan of Arc. His Latin lessons must have been a sort of Wimbledon sewing bee: "Oh, Jones Mi, do lend me your handkerchief, do. I can't go on. I do love him so." Take an ounce of charm (if you can find it), two of honesty (I doubt it) and three of sincerity (hopeless) and mix together in a marriage bed. Leave to cool for four years, then serve insistently. Result: adoration of the magister.

• "It's his play but our show. His loss but our gain. And after all what has he to lose? A dreary melodrama. They don't pour worse smells down the sinks

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of school labs. Or if they do, things have changed mightily since my day. A grubby fourth-former, scratching his bottom, and whiling away a truant hour, couldn't have thought up a more useless piece of proser.

"No," she said calmly, "you don't think that. You just say it."

"Stock line," I replied. "Take it back to your desk and rewrite it. I say it, Liz, and I think it."

"Then why are you so unhappy about it?"

"There are too many 'whys' in the world; three to a sentence. Each man in his time should be allowed only one: why am I what I am? Simple, neat. After that everybody minds his—or her—business."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. Heartbroken. But there's nothing I can do about it."

"You can stop them."

"No. You misunderstand. I cannot stop them because I know this to be the only way to have a success next week. This is what Aaron and Felix and Bale should have done a long time ago. But they didn't. That's why I'm heartbroken. It's all my baby, the wretched little thing."

"Not now. Not with Alex and Sharland and Mr. Brownhill working on it."

"On the contrary. Take this my baby and lay it in the streets of this ancient and noble market-town and allow each of its ancient and noble citizens to kick it a little bit. No matter who lifts his foot—be he shoe-black or sheriff—it shall always be my baby. I

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am still—*ora pro nobis*—the stooge manager. That's my cross. That's my crown."

"Oh, God, you're as bitter as ever."

"No, no, no. Not bitter. Just bewildered, Liz." I was talking to her like a friend again. That was strange, to be wondered at. Perhaps the reason was that I had to confide in somebody. Bale was at school, Robin in Town; in any case they were out of the question. So I turned to her, and in so doing felt our past disappear, or rather that particular section of the past we both hated to remember. She was the Liz of the set-up. Liz of the circle bar. Unpropitious titles for one as lost as she. "You see, I have two goals. One is the success of this play, the other is to do my job efficiently. I'm not a prig, I'm not sucking up to Felix. When I say I want to do my job efficiently, it's because I was brought up in the lore of the theatre. I had it drummed into me as a kid. Uncle Frank lost no opportunity for that, neither did Aunt Victoria. They never forgave Mother for marrying her carpet-salesman and they went out of their way to claim me. From the very first they intended me for the stage. That is why I cannot salve my conscience as an S.M. Sir Frank could butcher his plays—in fact, did—but never his stage manager. *He* was appointed to keep the production exactly the way Frank had set it. There would have been all hell to play had Ernie Tottle behaved as I am. There it is. It may be sentimentality, it may be the curse of the dead, the inevitable legacy, but I cannot do anything about it. Then on the other hand, we have Bale. All that he has put into the play, all that depends on the

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success of it. And more besides: our success, Audrey's come-back, a starring role for Alex, good notices for Sharland and a spell of security for us all. Am I justified in throwing all that over? There may be everything actors dream of just around the corner."

She sat for a while in silence. I knew she wanted to help me. Finally she asked, "What would Bale say?"

"Ah, there's the rub. I do not know. In fact I do not want to know."

She said slowly, "I think he would sympathize. I think he would understand."

It was the answer I had been praying for. S. Shepherd on his knees before the great god Dilemma. S. Shepherd raking among the ashes trying to find something of worth, a glittering gold piece of a souvenir. S. Shepherd clutching his thumbs like bananas, praying. I could only say, "Bless you, Liz."

She smiled. "Do you know that's the nicest thing that's been said to me on this tour?"

I replied, "I know," and found I could say no more. There is a point beyond which words cannot penetrate.

So I allowed them to go ahead. In effect, I abandoned my veto. It was a slim chance but at least I was no longer alone. Perhaps we would both be proved wrong. But we could only find out by trying.

The first full version of Brownhill's script was given in public that Monday night. It was a scrappy

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performance and fully deserved the mediocre reception awarded it. Rehearsals had been too hectic, opinions too unsettled. Half the time the company seemed undecided as to what script they were playing. Nevertheless the total result was depressing. Optimistically we had been expecting a shattering triumph.

Sharland sighed. "Then I suggest we do it properly, darlings. Rehearse one act a day until we've got the whole thing set."

Laurie shook his head. "You know what the big trouble is, don't you, doc? It's something no rehearsing will cure." He cracked a knuckle disconcertingly. "Try as you will."

"Oh, not something more," I cried. "You've changed everything but the casting, Laurie. Aren't you satisfied yet?"

He grinned. "Keep your wool on, Bas. It's only an idea. But if you don't like it, I'll shove it back from whence it came."

"You'd better tell us," said Audrey. "You will sooner or later so it may as well be now."

"Darling doc." He blew her a kiss. "I hear the singing of your blood like a distant call to arms."

"Not to yours," she retorted. "You wouldn't get me inside that cage of lions for all the notices in the *Sunday Times*."

"But my suggestion will." He continued to leer at her, cracking his knuckles.

"Well, what is it?"

"But Sebastian has told you. He's a smart boy, young doc. You can tell I had the making of him."

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Look at those puny shoulders, that pasty expression, those eyes like peepholes in snow."

"My God," I cried, "do you mean *recasting*?"

He nodded, "Up in one. You know your way about, don't you?"

"I should—"

"Recasting? Heavens, we couldn't do that!" That was Alex. "Laurie, are you crazy?" That was Sharland. "You're a fool." That was Audrey.

"Perhaps." He shrugged indifferently. "But that's your answer. As I see it, it's your one chance."

"It's a fatal chance."

"Perhaps."

"But who?" demanded Dido. "You can't change everybody."

"Not everybody, lovely lady. Just you and one other."

"Me? But . . ."

I remembered something. There was a chord vibrating. "Actually Aaron had the same idea. He told me so during the first week. I wanted him to do it then but he wouldn't. He said something about contracts."

"Contracts, sh-t! Not worth the paper they're written on."

"But who? and we couldn't do it!" Sharland cried in one breath.

"Please yourself," he shrugged again. "I really couldn't care. Purely for the record though, you ought to know that I rewrote the epic with a change in mind."

"Will you tell us who!"

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"If you like. Blast!" He took out his pipe and regarded it ruefully. "Two days. Two days and I paid five and six for it. Doc Audrey for one."

"Change *me*?"

He nodded. "Play Monica. Didn't you see it? Your part, absolutely tailor-made. I didn't need to write it, I just heard you saying it."

"You *are* crazy," that was Dicky again. "I'm not so sure," and that Alex. "I can't quite see it." Audrey looked puzzled. "And in any case it's not the lead."

"It is in my show." He looked round for a diversion and started snapping matchsticks. He seemed unbelievably complacent as if he had been anticipating this discussion for weeks. "You forget when I saw it, I did not have the opportunity of seeing this lovely lady." He bowed to Liz. "I wondered why the part had been so under-written. It is obviously the crux of the play. Monica is the spanner in the works. So I took the chance of building it up. The result has been a certain re-balance of power. Everything now hinges on Monica. Not Rachel."

"That's true." I remembered the two new speeches he had given the part. They were far too good for Liz. "It does revolve around her now."

"But what about Liz? And who is going to play Rachel?"

"The lovely lady could play Essie."

"And Rachel?"

"*Dido!* Of course! That's what I told Aaron in the first place." I beamed at the startled faces.

"*Me?*" Her eyes popped. "Me play Rachel? Do

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you mean it?" She was half-giggling, half-weeping. "No, oh, no, it's too much. I can't believe it. You're just saying that. But what . . . I mean . . . do you really . . . oh, Mr. Brownhill . . ."

"Just a moment, Dido. It's not settled yet," Alex broke in pompously. "There's a hell of a lot we've got to decide first. Legally I mean. Contracts are bloody things."

"Oh, you can't take it away from her now," Caliban cried appealingly. "It'll break her heart, Mr. Ralph."

"I'm not going to take it away from her—if I can help it," Alex said. "But we must talk it over rationally. First, we must get people's opinions. What do you think, Audrey?"

"I don't know. I see Laurie's point, of course. Monica could be the lead and I think I could play it. But I don't know what my agent would say."

"He'll agree," Stephen put in, "provided it doesn't change your status as far as publicity and money is concerned. We know Walter fairly well and I think he would trust you to do the right thing."

"Well, there's no question of changing salaries or billing, of course," Alex said. "That's Felix's business and this must be done without his knowing. As far as business is concerned, nothing will be changed. Walter can take it up with Aaron after the Golders Green first night when the secret is exposed. If we haven't all been arrested by then." He grinned. He seemed to be enjoying himself. Perhaps he liked

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playing with this sort of fire. "As far as the part is concerned, I agree with Laurie. You could make a tremendous thing out of it."

"Well," she laughed, helpless, "we could try."

"Right. Then Dido. I take it you have no objections to playing Rachel?"

"Oh, no. Oh, please let me. I'm sure I could do it. I'll work ever so hard, I promise—"

"That will have to apply to all of us," he said. "There'll be no sitting down after this." He hesitated and said, almost shyly, "And Liz?"

"Here I am."

"What would you say, darling? Would you mind awfully? You can always refuse, you know. You are under contract to play Monica. Nobody can make you give up the part. If you want us to, we can forget the whole thing."

She said very softly, "No. I'd like Audrey to try it. Everybody knows I'm not an actress. As you all know, I tried to leave once before . . ."

He said, "You're not going to leave us now."

There was a pause. They were looking at one another. Alex said, "We can give it a try," and then the only sounds were those made by Dido as she ran over and hugged Caliban. I may have been wrong but I felt Alex's words applied to so much more than the play. The silence seemed to continue endlessly. The others were thinking of their new parts. I was thinking of Liz. She smiled at him and he shook his head like somebody who had been dragged from a raging sea. "Well, that's settled then. We'll start tomorrow."

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"One thing," said Sharland, "one thing, dear, you haven't thought of. What will Felix say?"

I laughed. I laughed right there full in his face. It was so satisfying to see someone else do the worrying.

Alex shrugged. "Look at it this way. We're in up to our necks. The only way we can justify ourselves is to have a fantastic success. We have no more time for half-measures."

So started bedlam. We took portions of Brown-hill's script back to our digs and copied out the sides. It affected us all. Rehearsals were to start the next morning. Everybody had to have a part, a definite sequence of moves to make, a definite series of cues to deliver. The time for experiment was over. As Alex had said, there was no more time for half-measures. I was being asked for no more decisions.

I slept uneasily. All my dreams were concerned with new speeches and new make-ups. I woke up in the early hours remembering costumes and wigs. I dozed off again thinking of dressing-rooms and programmes. This was followed by another wakeful spell concerned with announcements to the press. How much could we tell anybody? Just a slice, just the breath of a hint? But even that might give us away. Felix received his press-cuttings regularly. The merest hint would not escape those shifty eyes. He'd be on to us like a cat on a sparrow. There was nothing that he missed. He would produce our contracts with our breakfast mail. He'd have us in the Courts, he'd have us in Equity, hell's bells, he'd have us in the Old Bailey.

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Time was passing. Four o'clock struck. I remembered the station at S—— where I stood the first day, feeling the trains running north and watching the curtain rise on this most fantastic of all tours. Even then I knew. The sequence of events was cued from that first incident, the delayed arrival of the scenery-truck. I remembered the porter and the tramride and the ships bobbing like corks below the town at the foot of the hill. I remembered the posters and I remembered the theatres and I remembered the aeroplanes suspended like shining angels, trim as arrows, pin-sharp, clean and dedicated; the very sight of them piercing my adult's eye and reaching down into my childhood heart. I remembered the first sight of Bale, the arrival of the company, the dress rehearsal, Dolney and Adam's Creek. There was nothing I did not remember. Click, click, click. The cues followed each other with the regularity of an adding machine. Because of One, Two happens; because of Two, Three; because of Three . . . And now we were approaching the last set-up and the final strike.

What would happen after this; what should we do if the venture failed? There were no other jobs in sight. We had forgotten the future; our present had kept us completely immersed. But that was what I wanted; that was what I envied in those wet, breathless days at Shepherd's Cave. Give over worry. Feel yourself caught up in the irresistible plunge of the present. Let go forrad, let go aft. Shake off the trappings of the land, feel yourself lift to the surge of the ocean. Set your wheel amidships, pin-point

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your star. The horizon is yours for the taking. Let the gulls shriek, the lighthouse blink. Keep your eye on the horizon. There are no rocks where the water's blue.

And so we sailed.

We rehearsed on the Tuesday, we rehearsed on the Wednesday, we rehearsed on the Thursday, we rehearsed on the Friday, taking time out only to play the matinées with an eye on the clock, our scripts in our pockets. Not a moment was to be lost. When they were not required, I had the actors scouring the town for cheap props: pictures and ink-stands, ornaments and miniatures. What we could not buy, we faked. The original stock was packed in the baskets, trick stuff, wholly unsuitable, not to be used in this proud show. I worked far into the night remodelling the set, touching up the paint-work, sizing where I could, bracing and glueing to repair the ravages of the tour and shoddy workmanship. Caliban produced a new idea for the scene-change and Alex and Laurie worked with him for four hours to get it right. Dido and Dicky returned from a shopping expedition with a magnificent gold frame for two shillings and went off together, laughing, arm in arm. Liz took over the costumes and snipped and stitched until she could wear Dido's and Dido could wear Audrey's. Make-ups were tried and discarded—"too dark, too old". Effects were rehearsed—"too loud, too harsh". The music was changed—"too dreary, too banal". This was our show and resolutely we went to work. I have never been so proud of the theatre, so completely one-hearted. We

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were no longer stage manager and stars, A.S.M. and bit players. We were a company, directed towards one target, bound together by one ambition.

On the Saturday we held a conference. I remember them now: Maire, having for once abandoned her knitting and her correspondence, was still daubing paint on some bric-à-brac; Dido and Dicky were rehearsing in a corner; Caliban was diligently copying new prop lists; Alex was explaining the intricacies of the prompt copy to Liz; Audrey was running through her business with the tray and lamp.

I called them together and we checked the list of Things To Be Done. Dido wielded a pencil, Dicky held her hand. I was no longer amazed at anything. This company had become a family where wrangles fade at the mention of outside interference.

"Props," she read. "One green upholstered sofa, two armchairs with cushions, one writing-table, one bookcase, one low chest, one tall chest, one long table, one rocking chair, one hanging lamp."

"Check," said Caliban.

"Stage props. Desk: two pewter jars, two small silver urns, inkstand, pens and paper, two bronze figurines. Chest up stage: linen, newspaper, magazines. Chest down stage: books, shot-cartridges. Table centre: tablecloth, two plates, two knives, two forks . . ."

"Check," said Caliban.

• "Hand props. Prompt side . . ."

The show was being assembled. Bit by bit it grew together. Sheet after sheet of props, of lighting cues,

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music cues, effect cues. Lists of things to be done dwindled and were discarded altogether. Somebody wrote down, "Check transport for scenery" and "new handbag for Monica". Five minutes later somebody had already come along and ticked them off.

Caliban started cleaning the stage for the matinée. Dicky went off still mumbling his part, Liz still puzzled over the prompt copy, Maire scampered back to put a last dab of paint "just there".

The half-hour was called and the curtain went up on the matinée.

Click, click, click, the cues went. Click, click, the moves. Two prompts were given, one effects record dragged on too long. Otherwise it was as good a performance as we could hope to give.

Afterwards we sat about drinking cups of tea, hardly daring to speak. Outside the theatre, Saturday evening crowds jostled in the streets, unaware of *Storm Thunder* and the tight knots in the pits of our stomachs.

Robin phoned, but I sent word to say I had left the theatre. A stillness descended over everything.

At seven the lights went on, the audience began to drift in. At seven-fifteen Caliban called the half and the actors touched up their make-up. At seven-thirty they were ready. The fire-curtain rose, the music started. The last performance before Golders Green had begun.

And so we approached the final week.

Chapter Ten

THE first setback occurred before we had been at Golders Green half an hour. Aaron phoned, calling a full rehearsal of cast and lights for four o'clock that afternoon. "I want to see how terrible you are," he said.

I felt sick. This we had not anticipated. We had not visualized meeting Aaron and Felix until after the first night; now it was obvious that they were going to hang round our necks until the curtain rose.

Dicky said, "There's only one thing to be done. Tell him."

Alex shook his head. "We couldn't possibly. He would never listen. We'll have to rehearse as called."

"And the set? And the casting?"

He shrugged. "Put them back as they were. He must not suspect for a moment what we've been doing."

Caliban was supervising the get-in, gloating over the freshly timbered flats. Dido was carrying Monica's clothes into Audrey's room, Rachel's into her own. I called them together and told them the news. They went deathly white. "What on earth shall we do, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Pray," I said, "and call rehearsal for four o'clock. The old version."

"But I've forgotten the moves. And the lines."

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"So have we all. Aaron doesn't know what he has coming to him. But he asked for it. Make sure everybody knows and keep all this new stuff out of the way."

An hour later they arrived. I recognized the terrifying asthmatical breathing as soon as it entered the theatre; the Heavenly Twins; Aaron and Robin; Aaron booming, "My God, I should have guessed it. Not a stitch of work's been done." This was depressing. I thought we had done rather well; we had had to put the set up without the help of the stage-plans because Caliban, in his enthusiasm, had thrown these away.

"Hullo, Bas." This was Robin. "Have a good tour?"

"Blissful," I said. "Look at my suntan."

"Dead drunk half the time," Aaron snorted. "I know you stage managers. I haven't found one I can trust. Not a single one."

"The fault may be in you," I retorted. "They're like dogs or horses. They always know if you have no faith in them and respond accordingly."

He did not relish that. He glared and swore and then we got down to work. "Have you called everybody for four o'clock?"

"Yes, master. The tinker, the tailor, the soldier, the sailor."

He looked closely. "Are you drunk now?"

"No. Just floating."

He grunted and stalked up the aisle. Robin explained in an aside, "It's this new show. It opened in Brighton last week and got terrible notices."

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"You wait until you've seen ours," I said. And prayed.

"The ones you had last week were quite good."

"Yes, quite good," I agreed. How fortunate that the critic had not returned later in the week to find Audrey playing Monica. Fortunate but dangerous.

They were completing the set-up. Dido had unearthed the old props, Caliban was hanging the old pictures. The ceiling came down with a sigh and settled over the set like a cover, putting the lid on everything.

Aaron started to place the spots. "One on the desk. Two in the bay window. Three up stage of the window. Four on the rocking chair. Five in the hall. Six on the table. Seven on the chest. Eight on the kitchen door. Isn't that kitchen door too far down, Sebastian?"

"No," I lied. "It's the same as you've always had it."

"I don't believe a word of it. Not a flaming word."

Robin and I exchanged glances. "He's been like this for the last week," he sighed.

"So have we. This is going to be my most favourite rehearsal."

It was. Even the Revelation Players had seen nothing like it. In comparison with it, the original dress rehearsal had been a Command Performance. Nobody knew their lines. Nobody knew their moves. How could they when they had spent the last three weeks in forgetting them? Even Dido, on the book, was unable to help: her pages were a map of corrections. Arrows charted the excursions of Brownhill

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and Shepherd; footnotes explained the voyages of Sharland and Alex. I shudder to think what Aaron would have said, had he seen it, but he didn't. That was Dido's most solemn duty: to keep it out of his hands.

He grunted and snorted and swore and threw up his hands in horror. He thumped with his stick and stamped up the aisles and kicked the seats and threw things at the cast. When he was not shouting he was choking dangerously. His hair-line seemed to recede visibly. His nose grew pink, his eyes streamed. He had never seen such a company (snort); he had never seen such a performance (snort); he had never seen such a play (a strangulating cough). What we had been paid for, he did not know. How we had spent the tour, he had not the foggiest idea. What we thought we were doing, he would never understand. We should be hung, drawn and quartered (wheeze), keel-hauled (wheeze), tarred and feathered (wheeze) and finally run out of the country (cough, cough, cough). We were wasters, malcontents, fakers, a third-rate concert party, traitors, less than Ensa, less than Rada, less than the Railway Porters' Dramatic and Glee Club. We were the end and so on and so on.

Even Robin was horrified. But what could we do? We could not tell them we had been rehearsing another production. Finally he stamped out of the theatre, washing his hands of everything, to return a few minutes later with Felix who lisped and blustered like a Praed Street pawnbroker. Finally we settled down to a rehearsal which kept us there

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until three in the morning and left us weak as kittens and weeping like taps.

So this was Golders Green. So we prepared for our great London success.

The great day dawned with a cloudburst. I woke up in Dicky's dressing-room with a head like a football. A Rugby football, elliptical, bouncing out of control.

Another rehearsal was called for ten. Dicky said, "We can't go on. We must give up all ideas of the new version." Audrey said, "Rubbish. I refuse to play Rachel again." Alex said, "If only we can hold out until tonight." Dido wept and said, "I hate the stage. I never want to set foot on one again." Even Maire looked downhearted. Finally Caliban appeared with a telegram from George Bale: "Whatever happens I can never thank you enough." So that settled it. It was not his play but it was being done for him. "We'll do the Brownie Version tonight," I said.

The day wore on. Painters appeared to touch up the set, electricians appeared to wire up more lights. Telegrams arrived. A bouquet came for Audrey. Dido said, "Dicky loves me. He told me so this morning." Paulina swept in and shot him out to lunch. Alex broke down and wept on Liz's shoulder. Maire lost her knitting, found two nephews in *The Stage* and Caliban smashed an effects record.

At four o'clock a wire arrived from Laurie Brownhill: "Suggest you cut pp 41 dash 43 comma 47 dash 51 stop. Work in necessary detail in final scene act two scene one stop. Give my love to Aaron stop. A

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kiss to Felix stop. My rejoicings to the company stop. On second thoughts perhaps you should revert to original casting love Whore-monger." This I burned.

At six o'clock we were queuing up to be sick. Aaron appeared with an even bigger stick and insisted on moving the kitchen door further up stage. This meant altering all the spots. Caliban appeared with a new effects record. "Not seagulls but monkeys." Maire found her knitting but lost her copy of *The Stage*. Dido fainted and Liz kissed Alex firmly on the mouth, up stage of the hall-door backing. Paulina's poodle made a mess in the prop-room and I was called to the stage door.

It was Bale. "I won't come in. I've got the boys to feed." I was aware of a shambling chorus of school-caps and waterproofs. Somebody called, "Good luck, sir," and Bale went on, "I've managed to get rooms for the night. We're going back to school in the morning."

I looked at him. It was impossible to say anything. He was no longer a person. He was just a name. We were doing this for him, we were cutting our throats for him. I said, "Bale, trust me."

"Eh?"

"Nothing. Goodbye."

They moved off, chattering like monkeys. I went back on stage. Aaron was coughing like a howitzer. He had found the gold frame Dido had bought. "It's a shocker. It's a bastard. Throw it out."

"It's not ours," I said.

"I' really i' terrible," Felix lisped.

Finally I threw the temperament of the tour. In

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the wings even the electricians stopped working. Get out, I shrieked. Get out and leave us alone. We've been touring for six weeks without you. You never once showed any interest in us. Now get out for if you don't I shall.

And I meant it. Now that the time had come I longed to be a thousand miles away.

Mercifully they went. Robin shepherded them out. "Good luck, Bas. I'll keep them out of your way. Do you want me back stage tonight?"

"No, nor you either. This isn't Covent Garden!"

They went.

Caliban shouted, "They've gone," and rounded up the stage hands. Dido collected her clothes and rushed them round to Liz. Liz took off her uniform and handed it to Audrey. Audrey flung her things into Dido's dressing-room. Maire found *The Stage*.

I called the electricians. "Bring your long ladder. I want to alter the spots."

"Not again?"

"Yes, again."

On stage Alex and Dicky were changing the props. The set fell apart, moved round and took up its new shape. New pictures blossomed on the walls. The gold frame appeared over the kitchen door. In the wings Liz sorted out the new gramophone records, took up the treasured prompt copy. Somebody raced on with new window-curtains, Maire made another dab with her poster paint "just there".

The phone rang. "Drop your fire-curtain. There's too much noise." It came down with the distant rumble of gunfire. Then there was silence. Infinite,

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deathly silence. We looked at one another. There was nothing more to be done.

Maire tiptoed round with her paint brush. Audrey went back to rehearsing her business with the lamp and tray. Caliban explained about the new effects record. ("Honestly, they do sound just like sea-gulls.") Dido appeared with Dicky and Liz came on with Alex. I looked at them and felt like a marriage bureau. I felt we ought to be doing *Measure For Measure* but I hadn't the height for Angelo.

"Half an hour, please."

So the moment was approaching. There was nothing more we could do.

Alex asked, "What's the house like?"

"Pretty good. Raymond's there and so is Cynthia. And that new Korda man."

"Please God," Dicky murmured.

"Walter said Roger Mason is coming. And Bobbie King."

"They say the show at the Lyric is closing," Alex put in. "That's Roger, isn't it?"

"Please God," Dicky murmured again.

"You'd better all check your make-ups," I said. "At the moment nobody could tell who is playing what."

They drifted away, talking of the managements and agents taking their seats beyond the fire-curtain. They had already forgotten The Great Fake. They were actors again. They were going to do a show. That was all that mattered.

That feeling I found important. I longed to hang on to it, to forget everything but the job in hand.

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Afterwards would come the reward or the retribution. But time enough to do the worrying then.

"Fifteen minutes, please."

"Slides finished, Mr. Shepherd. You can take up the fire-curtain."

"Right. Thank you. Take it up, please."

A clang of metal. The distant rumble and behind it, sickeningly, growing louder, the baying of the wolves, the sounds of the audience.

For better or for worse. I could think of nothing more apposite than that. In little over two hours we should know the answer. I should know Bale's reaction and Aaron's and Robin's.

Somebody said, "They sound like lions feeding," and somebody else, "No. Just getting ready to feed."

Caliban appeared at my side. "Music?"

"No. Wait a moment."

Hang on to this moment. This is the moment that counts, this pin-point moment balanced trembling between the past and the future. For weeks we have planned. Now comes the result of our planning. For weeks we have dreamed. Now comes the reality.

"Phone, Mr. Shepherd."

"Yes?"

"Front of house. They're all in. Go up when you like."

"Thank you. Stand by music."

"Clear, please."

Reluctantly they left the stage. Alex was petrified with nerves. Dicky's teeth were chattering. Even Audrey looked sick.

"Good luck, darlings."

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"All set, Caliban?"

"All set, Mr. Shepherd."

"Check hand props during the overture. Where's Miss Rudge?"

"In the prompt corner."

"Good." I went over to her. "Are you ready, Liz?"

"I think so. Good luck, Bas."

"And to you, darling. You're a trouper really."

She smiled. "I've learnt."

"Stand by board. Music, please. Footlights."

The opening bars of the new overture ripped through the theatre. There's your first hint, I thought. Now you know things aren't what they seem.

"Stage lights, please."

The working-lights snapped off. The battens glowed. Warm light spilled from the floods. The shrill rays of the baby-spots hit the stage. I felt as cold as ice.

"You should have a flood on, up stage prompt side, George."

"Just going on." The patter of feet on the platform above me. "On now." Let go forrad, let go aft.

"Thank you."

I walked on stage to check the lights. Dido was waiting at the table. I remembered the first night in S——. Then Audrey had stood there. I remembered my row with Felix and how she had kissed me, saying, "Don't worry. Just nerves, darling." It had been a good tour. Well worth doing.

"Ready, sweet?"

"Yes, Bas. I'm terrified."

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"You'll be a star in a couple of hours."

"Music ending, Mr. Shepherd."

"Warn houselights. Warn curtain."

She said, "Do you think they'll ever forgive us, Bas?"

"Who knows. But I don't really mind. Do you?"

"Never. He loves me, Bas. He told me so."

"Nobody could fail to. Kiss me. We're going up now."

"Thank you for being so kind."

"Bless you, Dido."

"Music out, Mr. Shepherd."

"Thank you, Caliban. Stand by. Good luck."

I walked back to the corner, gingerly. This was the moment. I wanted it to continue indefinitely. After this there was no turning back.

"Houselights out."

"House out."

"God be with us. Effects in."

"Effects in."

I turned. They were all watching me. Anxious, drawn faces waiting for the minute which had arrived.

"Curtain."

"Curtain."

Click, click. The cues were given. The guide-wire trembled. The curtain disappeared above me. The show had started.

During the first act Aaron sent round to demand my head on a platter, and during the interval they

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stormed back to see me, but I had already locked myself in the lavatory. In the second act, three of the cast collected exit rounds and the curtain finally fell to applause such as I had never before experienced. We knew then we had been saved. No manager, no producer could afford to go against a reception like that.

We swept into the scene-change like Test players forming a scrum-down with two minutes to go and three points to make. Flats positively sizzled round; props seemed to strike themselves of their own accord. Caliban called beginners and the cast leapt to their places, their eyes shining, their lips twitching, prepared to raze the theatre with the very brilliance of their playing.

Halfway through the third act, I realized I had already lost interest in Aaron and Felix. Only one man remained fixed in my conscience now. Myself. As seen through the eye of George Bale.

We came down in silence. That wonderful, horrifying silence which leaves the actors as breathless as their audience. The building could have blown away; they would have been unaware. Then came the applause, the curtain calls, the cries of author, author. But Bale did not come up and Brownhill was not there.

"Curtain down. Stand by for another."

"Shall we make a speech, Bas?"

"No. Stand by. Curtain up. Hold it. Curtain down. Stand by for The King."

"One more, Bas. We can take one more."

"All right. Going up. Hold it. Down. Houselights, please. King, please."

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• "House up."

"King on."

• The roll of drums. The clatter of seats drowning the last of the applause. The trumpets. The overwhelming fatigue. The relief of a first night over.

"King out, Mr. Shepherd."

"Fire-curtain. Working-lights, George."

The battens blinked and faded. The fire-curtain rumbled down, cutting us off from the outside world. The audience was departing. Now we were alone again; close-confined once more.

Nobody left the stage. Nobody spoke. The pass-door banged and banged again. "A nice little show," the electrician said.

First round was Felix. He looked like a beetle with an extra large ball of dung. He kissed everybody and wept on Audrey's shoulder and slapped Dido's behind and shook my hand and slithered over his words and fell over the furniture and raced off to find Roger Mason.

Next came Aaron. I could see the light of battle in one bloodshot eye but he could not say very much because he had Paul King at his elbow, speaking earnestly, "What I liked so much, Aaron, was the way you picked out the third act. It was almost stylized. It's something I've never seen in your work before." I backed away hastily, caught a glare from the crimson orb, shook hands, mumbled my thanks, giggled nervously and ducked out of sight.

• Now people were pouring through the pass-door. I saw half-a-dozen agents swooping on their babes like mothers at a school outing and two film stars

making a bee-line for Felix with cheeks to be kissed and eyes to be fixed firmly on the part played by Audrey. Groups of people mushroomed all over the stage, enveloping the actors, the props, even the property men. Somebody came up with a bottle and somebody else offered a cigarette and three people asked simultaneously, "Who on earth is the author of the play?"

I wondered then. Who was George Bale? More important, where was he?

Then came Robin. I braced myself for the onslaught. I knew we could not get away with it completely. Somebody had to raise hell; somebody had to threaten an arrest, a horsewhipping. Somebody did. But it was not Robin. Not my Robin of the quick step and the sudden engaging smile.

No. He shook my hand and drew me aside and said, "I really must tell you how much I admire your courage, Sebastian. I always said you were the right man for the job. I would never have had the nerve but you . . . you have done it. I want you to know that I have persuaded Felix to let you take my place when I leave but I feel you ought to be going to Covent Garden. Not me."

I could hardly credit my senses. The irony of his reaction appalled me. He went on with his congratulations. He could not know how he was disfiguring himself. He was crashing from his pedestal in a welter of plaster compliments. My Robin. My honourable and true friend. Who should have torn me apart for breaking every rule in the theatre; who should have had me blackballed for life; who should,

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at the very least, have shown himself aware of my crime. But he didn't. He thanked me. Thanked me!

I felt sick. The conversation undid all the good wrought by the tour. I felt there was nobody I could trust. Not a single soul on that stage who cared one scrap for integrity or honesty. Not a single soul.

Felix rushed by with a tray of glasses, slithered to a stop, embraced me dangerously. "Oh, Thebathtian, thith i' a wonderful night. I tho proud of you. Real trouperth, tha' what you're all are. Of courth, you were ver', ver' naughty but wha' it matter now? We've got a triumph, dear boy, a real triumph." He shivered all over and gurgled noisily. "Hath Robin told you about the job? Oh, he' tho right, the dear boy. It' yourth, Bath, all yourth. It wath ju' made for you. Come and thee me in the morning and we'll talk termth. All right?"

Robin smiled and said, "Of course it's all right. It's yours, Bas, and you deserve it."—"I'll thay he do'th . . ." I had to walk away. They would never have understood in a thousand years if I had turned that job down. Sharland was right. Principles fly out of the window when success comes in at the door. Had we failed, they would have flayed me. But we had succeeded and now they were complimenting me. The precarious body-snatching business of the theatre.

Some reporters were interviewing Dido; Roger Mason was talking with Alex; Paul King was earnestly questioning Audrey. There were people everywhere grabbing at conversations, glasses, red-stained cigarettes and jobs. They were like vultures,

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I thought, feeding on the wretched corpse of the play we had killed.

And then I saw Bale.

He was standing in the wings with his boys grouped behind him; a high priest and his acolytes. I went across hesitantly, not daring to meet his eye, and in that movement revealed my guilt and my failure. For I had betrayed him.

He smiled ruefully. "A good show, Bas," and took my hand. "You must have worked very hard after I left."

The implication was that we had waited for him to leave. "There were one or two things we had to change," I said desperately. "You may have noticed . . ."

"Oh, I noticed. We couldn't help but notice." He dropped my hand. "Dido was good. I had no idea she was such a capable little actress." For a moment his eye lingered on the squawking, screeching parrots in the cage before him, then he straightened his shoulders. "Well, we must be going."

"But the managers?" I cried. "Paul King is here and so is Roger Mason. They're waiting to meet you. You can't run away. Everybody is expecting you——"

"Everybody? I don't think so. Thank Dido for me. I know you understand. I must get the boys off to bed."

The boys. I looked at them. Five crusaders with murder in their eyes.

"I hope you liked it," I said helplessly.

One of them set his teeth. "Not very much," he said.

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Bale swung round, "Allison!"

The boy blanched. "I'm sorry, sir. The gentleman asked me."

"What didn't you like?" I faltered. "I thought it went rather well."

"It wasn't what we came to see," he said.

"Will you hold your tongue, boy!" Bale's eyes were blazing. "Mr. Shepherd is not the slightest bit interested in your puerile opinions."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"I see." And I did. I saw they would never forgive me. And rightly so. I had dared to humiliate George Bale. "Yes, of course." But they too would never understand. They were Shepherd's Cave and Adam's Creek just as Felix was Uncle Frank and Aunt Victoria. They were the shining angels, as trim as arrows, clean and dedicated. They were the world beyond the pane of glass, untouched.

"Now go, Allison, and take the others with you. Wait for me at the stage door."

"Yes, sir."

"Allison?"

"He's the one you call Bloggs Minor."

"I might have guessed it," I said. "There is so much I might have guessed. He'll be very good in *Macbeth*."

"He should not have been so impertinent. I apologize, Sebastian. As a rule he's quite a well-behaved boy. Now I must go and collect them. 'Goodbye'—he offered his hand awkwardly—"and thank you for everything."

"Bale——"

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"Yes?"

"You can't go like this. Let me explain at least."

"There's nothing to explain, Sebastian. My play wasn't good enough, that's all."

"It wasn't that. At least, it was more than that. Listen, Bale——"

"Another time, Sebastian. I shall be writing to Felix. There's nothing more to be said."

"But nothing *has* been said."

"Then we'll leave it like that."

He turned to go and at that moment Felix spotted him. "*Mithter Bale!* There you are. At latht, at latht. Come along, do."

Bale waved, retreating, but it was too late. Robin was there and so were three visiting actresses. "Dear Mr. Bale, do forgive the liberty, but we must congratulate you on a simply wonderful play. Why, in all our lives we have never seen such real theatre." Paul King rushed up and Roger Mason was not far behind. I found myself separated from him and for a moment thought of slipping quietly away. But some protective instinct kept me there; no matter how he felt, the time of our friendship was not over yet.

He was disengaging himself from a large-bosomed blonde and I heard his precise voice articulating clearly, "I beg your pardon, madam, but I fear you are mistaken. I did not write the play." A precise voice? It echoed all over the stage. Robin threw his head back and Felix's lip twitched. It was their first indication that they had not had such a success after all.

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"A very good play," Mason was saying. "Felix and I have been having quite a little chat about it, Mr. Bale, and I'm sure you'd like to know that everything is all right. Now if you'd come and have lunch with me tomorrow, we could settle it all quite comfortably. What about calling at my office first—"

"You're also mistaken, sir," Bale said reedily. His Adam's apple was bobbing crazily but his eyes were clear, cold and firm. "Whatever you have to discuss with Felix does not concern me. Now if you'll let me pass, I must get the boys to bed."

"I don't quite understand," Mason replied. Clearly he was not accustomed to this sort of treatment from an unknown author. "My name is Mason. Roger Mason. I want to discuss your play

"Not my play!" He was losing his grip but not his dignity. A lifetime spent in controlling boisterous form-rooms must have been responsible for that instinctive jerk of the shoulders. "Obviously Mr. Urban has not told you everything. I suggest you ask him for a full explanation. Now will you please excuse me?"

"Felix, what the hell is all this? It is the right man, surely. Am I making an awful fool of myself?"

"Not at all. He's merely trying to tell you he did not write the play," I broke in. "He's not really the author."

Now the group swung on me and suddenly I found myself standing next to Bale again. I saw Felix squinting at me angrily and heard his sudden lisp, like a snake rearing.

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"Then I must beg your pardon," Mason laughed, embarrassed. "I was under the impression you were George Bale."

"He is. But he still did not write the play," I said.

"I don't require your assistance, Sebastian—"

"And he's quite right, Mr. Mason. Felix has not told you everything."

"For Christ's sake, will somebody tell me what all this is about!" Mason flushed furiously. He was used to secretaries and dictaphones and arrangements made well in advance. He was used to introductions and little lunches at the Savoy and bowing and scraping and carpets under his feet when he signed his contracts. "Are you or are you not the author?"

"I am not. I don't know who did the rewriting—probably Sebastian here. I always told him he ought to write—but it's certainly not my play."

"It's Laurie Brownhill's," I explained. "You may have heard of him."

"But not all of it," Felix broke in to appeal. "Only thome. The main play is Bale'th. That ith right, thurely, George?"

"No." Bale shook his head. "I'm sorry, Felix." The crowded scene was making him uncomfortable. Obviously he was thinking of the curt, finalizing letter he had intended to write. "The idea was mine, the characters are mine but the play is not. It was rewritten after I left the company."

"Oh, I'm not interested in these domestic arrangements!" Mason waved them away, sweeping Caroline, the school and George Bale into an imaginary

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ashcan. "Every play is rewritten on tour and the author accepts help from all sorts of people who don't figure on the programme. All I want to know is whether you are the man to sign the contract or whether I have to find this Brownhill person."

"Well, I believe I am the man," Bale giggled nervously. "My name is on the posters. But I'm afraid the matter is going to end there. There'll be no contract."

"Oh, come now, Bale—"

"No contract? Bale, m' dear, wha' happened to you?"

"No contract?"

"No. I've decided I cannot agree to it."

It was as easy as that. I had asked and I had been given Bale's reaction. I cannot agree to it. All doubts resolved, all questions answered. The tour was over. I looked round at the company: Liz and Alex, Audrey, Sharland, Dido and Maire, Caliban. Their disappointment was obvious. I could not bear to look at them. But Robin's disappointment and Felix Urban's and Aaron's I could stomach joyfully.

"That's all very interesting but I still don't see your position, Bale." Mason—a short, podgy man—was squinting at Bale through cigar smoke.

"My position is only this: you want to buy the play from me and I feel I cannot sell it because it is not mine. That's as simple as I can make it."

"And straightforward." Mason looked at Felix, at Aaron and then at Paul King. Then choosing his words carefully, he pushed a final question at Bale.

"And what would you do if we put the play on under

... Brownhill's name, for example? Not that I say we shall, but for example."

"Then I shall sue you for plagiarism." Bale giggled. "I'm sorry to sound so melodramatic, Mr. Mason. None of this is much in my line and I'm only trying to protect myself. And I think I would be entitled to that."

"Quite, quite . . ."

"Plagiarism! But, George, you're mad!"

"Not at all," I cut in. "He's merely standing by his own rights, Felix. We used his title and all his ideas. We did give him the credit but he needn't accept it. That's his privilege."

"Bath, you keep out of thith!"

"Why? It's as much my business as yours. When all's said and done, I am responsible for the switch. I did not want it but I allowed it. I attended rehearsals every day and I gave the final word this evening. The whole thing is my fault." It was ridiculous. I was seeking the censure which nobody seemed willing to give me. But then the whole affair was ridiculous. Never before had a business interview been conducted under such conditions, with such incoherence and to so little point. Bale was obviously adamant.

"Then what are you driving at, Bale?"

"Driving at?" The blue eyes flickered—looked bewildered. You could see them thinking, What have I forgotten? What subtlety are they anticipating now? "Why, nothing. I have my play here"—he fumbled in his pocket and produced a script—"and that is the only one I can sign for. I don't say it's as

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good as the one we saw tonight but it is my play and I know I can take responsibility for it. This one"—he waved vaguely at the stage—"is somebody else's. A friend of Sebastian. But I think I'm right in saying he cribbed it from mine."

"Well . . ." Mason started, "plagiarism is difficult to prove, you know."

"Not in this case," I said. "We gave him the prompt copy and he cribbed it from there direct." The schoolboy verb threw a dull ordinariness over the whole extraordinary transaction.

"You what?" Felix yelped.

"We gave him the prompt copy. I think I'm right in saying that." I saw Caliban nod miserably and shuffle his feet. He was paying dearly for his friendship with Brownhill; but so were we all. Except Bale. "So in a case like this, I don't think he'd have any difficulty in proving plagiarism had taken place."

"Bath, you thwine!" Felix's face was purple with fury. Now I could see Robin's job going, the whole beautiful landslide for which I had been praying. In another minute my future would not exist.

"Why swine, Felix?"

He could not openly say, "Because you're siding with him, not me," but his expression betrayed him. And I rejoiced in that expression. I wanted them all to see it. I wanted Bale to see it. Now at least they were acknowledging my crime, not glossing over it with graceful compliments. "If anybody is going to call me swine, it should be Bale."

The pale eyes flickered over mine but he said

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nothing. I was content. At least he knew now how I felt.

"This whole business is preposterous, beyond me," Mason rapped. Clearly his ulcers were beginning to react. "Nobody seems to know whose play you're doing or by whose authority. Will somebody tell me what I am supposed to do now?"

"Read the original," I suggested, and took it from Bale. "If you want *Storm Thunder*, here it is."

I was aware of a sigh going up from the company, almost a groan. With that movement—with that passing of a script from one hand to another—went the tour, all our work, our dreams. But there was nothing else to be done. Like everything else in that ill-fated venture, it should have been done long ago. We had had no right to build castles with Bale's dreams. We should have realized that taking those left him with nothing. We should have realized that compromise (compromise with one's conscience) was not for him. Either you did it or you did not do it; you did not say you had done it when you hadn't. Bloggs Minor could have told us that, any of Bale's old boys. But we had been brought up in a different school and it had taken us a little longer to learn. But we had learnt and now it was all right. This way everybody lost but Bale was kept in the clear.

"This is your work?" Mason snapped. He thumped the script impatiently. "You can swear to it that it's all your work?"

"Why . . . yes," said Bale surprised.

"Then I'll read it. But God help you if I find this has been . . . cribbed from someone else."

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Bale smiled. This time he had noticed the word. Something in it seemed to restore his confidence. Perhaps it brought back visions of end-of-term examinations and inky boys sweating under a pale light. "A poor thing but mine-own."

The words Brownhill had used; only then they were not true. He should have said, "An excellent thing but not mine at all." That might have clarified the situation at the outset.

Mason was paging through the script and I heard Paul King urgently requesting Caliban to fetch another. Already the spotlight was leaving Brownhill; already the success of the new version had been forgotten. Felix started extolling the virtues of the original and Aaron drew King aside to explain certain wonderful pieces of production which we in our ignorance had dropped on the road. Robin, helping to jolly things along, offered everybody drinks and a baby-eyed blonde frightened the life out of Bale by asking for a light. The crowd broke up into groups: the visitors, the managers, the company. And apart from them, and apart from each other, Bale and myself. He was still smiling nervously and once I saw him wave to Dido with a timorous gesture which still managed to express affection. I longed to approach him but felt entirely lacking in energy.

Mason and Felix had disappeared; Paul King was still searching in vain for a script. The baby-eyed blonde was drinking whisky from a flask and an agent was whistling "I want to be happy" in waltz time. They looked like guests at a party when the

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host has been suddenly called away; out of habit trying to carry on as usual.

Only the company made no pretence. It was no party for them. They stood together, Audrey, Alex, Liz and Sharland, Maire, Dido and Caliban, a defensive square, a group, not talking, waiting for the final blow. I took out my cigarettes and joined them. "The tumbril leaves at dawn." They smiled. Suddenly Dido acted. She ran across to Bale and brought him over. There were smiles again, tentative, sickly smiles not sure of their reception. But they need not have worried. He was only too willing to forgive them. Indeed I'm not certain he thought of forgiveness. He said confidently, "I haven't been so nervous since my first day in front of a class," and we laughed. It made us feel better. It brought us together. Bale and the company. The Company.

Eventually they returned. Mason looked ominous, a black cloud. He said, "This is the one you started off with, I take it?"

"Yes," Bale nodded, thinking no doubt of twenty-three full versions and a start four years old.

"Well, I'll read it. I don't promise anything, mind you. This is the play I wanted but as far as I can see it doesn't exist. If you can straighten out the difficulties with Felix, well and good. If not, I don't want to know. It's got be quite settled before I'll spend a penny on it." He looked at the script and then thrust it savagely into his pocket. "George Bale, eh? A schoolmaster, eh? Never had one like you before. God help the poor little brats in your house. Well, good night. My secretary will write you."

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"Good night, Mr. Mason."

Felix ushered him out. "It's well worth reading, Roger. I'll be very interested to hear what you've got to say. I really think he's got a future." He was obviously making sure of his place on any possible bandwagon.

Surprisingly then there was silence. The judge had left, the court had adjourned. The defendants were left looking uncomfortably at one another. The baby-eyed blonde whispered, "My, what a lot of fuss about nothing," and reached for her flask, and a red-head crooned, "My dear, I'd sell anybody for an offer from Roger Mason."

Bale started apologizing. "I'm terribly sorry it all worked out like that. I was going to write to Felix but when they came at me like an army I rather lost my head."

Alex shrugged, "We should apologize. I'm sorry, Bale. It just didn't work out, that's all."

"That's all." Audrey kissed him. "You'll probably never forgive us. But I don't really regret it. It was a chance worth taking."

"It nearly came off," Dido joined them. "It must seem beastly to you, Mr. Bale, but we were trying to make quite sure . . ."

"I know. You were very good tonight, Dido."

"Was I? Oh, I hoped you would think so. And I've always had faith in your play, do you remember? Perhaps Mr. Mason will like it and then it'll be all right after all."

"Perhaps. Good night, Dido."

They came up in turn to say good night, like boys

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leaving school for the last time. It was a spontaneous gesture and one which proved beyond any doubt that Bale had won.

Only Aaron seemed unconvinced. He had been silent far too long. He drew himself up and thumped with his stick. "While we're on the subject," he wheezed, "I've got several bones I'd like to pick myself. There was a hell of a lot in this play tonight that wasn't put there by me or George Bale or Laurie Brownhill. New moves for instance, new props and new lighting. Now who was responsible for that, eh? (Wheeze.) You, Dicky? or you, Alex? or you, Sebastian? The set was changed and the music was changed and the effects were changed. (Wheeze.) And if that weren't enough, you had to change the bloody casting as well. Now come here, Sebastian, come here and tell me all about it. . . ."

But that is another story and has no place here.

And so we ran on. For the rest of the week the houses were good, the receptions very good. Even the notices praised us. But somehow the offer of a West End run failed to materialize. There was a lot of talk about the authorship of the play and Felix even rushed off down to Kent to see Bale again, but it was no use, no use at all. I could have told him so.

Letters arrived for the cast, interviews and contracts. Dicky got his job with Korda, Audrey went off to see Tennents. Alex was offered something at the Embassy. Even Maire was invited to do a guest season at Windsor. The tight feeling of fellowship

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fell away. It was like a school breaking up. There were still performances to be given but the main goal had been reached. I could not blame them for this. It was quite natural.

Bale had said so. "They did all they could, Sebastian. They must have worked so hard during the last few weeks. Believe me, I understand now. I'm also deeply touched by what you tried to do. Don't think too badly of yourself."

"I didn't realize what it would do to you, magister. At least, I did realize in a way."

"But what am I? I wrote a play. It wasn't good enough. Heaven knows you told me that often enough. But I have made some friends and I've learnt a tremendous amount about the theatre, about people, about actors. You always seemed to see them as puppets, shallow, worthless creatures. They're not, you know."

"I know now."

"They proved that in the last few weeks. They're kind, they're more vulnerable than their audience. They put themselves out to capture so much more. In a way they're rather like children." He looked across the compartment at Bloggs Minor and his friends. "I suppose that is why I like working with them. They give."

I nodded. "It took you, an outsider, to show me that."

"Not quite such an outsider now. The next one will be better, I promise you."

"Uncle Bruce. So much better than Uncle Frank."

The train was moving.

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"I'll let you know as soon as we hear from Roger." He waved. "Come and see us on April the fourth." "Why?"

"The House Play . . . *Macbeth* . . . you promised . . ." The rest of the sentence was lost in a spurt of steam and smoke. I was glad. I did not want it to be a goodbye. I could see him still waving as the train swung away from the platform for points south.

That was the Tuesday.

On the Friday I could bear it no longer. I locked myself in the manager's office and phoned Roger. I said, "The script you were given—the original *Storm Thunder*—I wondered if you had read it yet."

There was a pause and then all he said was, "My dear man, have *you* read it? It's the worst play in the world. I think the man's quite mad."

∴ "No, he's not mad," I said but I could not add I had read it. I could not tell him it had been my life for longer than I cared to remember. "I phoned because he is a friend of mine."

"Friends . . . friends . . ." The voice crackled away and I replaced the receiver. I had said the right thing for once. Bale would understand. That was the old battle-cry; the old loophole. Bale would understand.

Strangely enough he always did.

It was the final strike. Audrey had gone and so had Stephen. Maire had left with her string bag and her knitting and her copy of *The Stage* and her innum-

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able correspondents. Dicky had swept away in a new Rolls-Royce.

The stage was almost bare. The props were packed in the baskets. The flats were stacked against the walls. The furniture was crated. They were dropping the ceiling.

The electrician removed the lead from the hanging lamp, Caliban went round undoing the lines.

I heard high heels tapping across the stage. It was Paulina. "Bas, darling, have you seen Dicky? He's not in his dressing-room."

"I think he's gone, Paulie," and then I saw her face. The final strike. "Perhaps he left a message for you at the hotel."

"No," she shook her head. "No, there was no message." She put up no fight. She accepted it quite simply, in the same manner as she had accepted the knowledge that it would happen some day, somewhere. The final strike, the inevitable, the last curtain. I fed her a drink and took her out to her car. When he saw me the chauffeur omitted his customary wink; I suppose he had expected it also. She was weeping. Not for herself but for the inevitability of it all. The curtain must fall somewhere.

When I went back on stage I found Liz waiting to say goodbye. She said, "May we part friends after all?"

I replied, "I hope we shall always be friends. Are you going to try again?"

She nodded. "I have been a terrible fool but I want to try again and so does he."

"I thought I noticed signs of a reconciliation."

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She smiled. "I could never play Monica but I **think** in time I'll learn to play Rachel. I do love my husband."

"And he?"

"He wants to love me. He wants to try again."

"There is no future the other way. Darling Liz, we have both learnt so much."

She looked round the stage. "In a way I'll be sorry to leave it. I hated the tour but one is always sorry to leave a good master. If only he had told me——"

"Would that have helped?"

She shook her head. "No, I suppose not. Not at the time. I was a child about life. Do you remember? But now, now . . ."

We watched him walking across the stage to join us, carrying his suitcase. "Shall we see you again, Bas?"

"Of course. Another try-out. Another tour. I'll be around."

"Thank you for everything."

"The thanks are mine." I looked at them. I wanted them to succeed. More than anything I wanted them to succeed. They would be worth praying for.

We shook hands. I still wondered how much he knew; how much he knew I knew. But the answer was no longer important and it followed them out of the door unspoken.

The battens were off, they were rolling up the ceiling. I said to Caliban, "Dicky has gone. Does Dido know?"

He said softly, "Yes, Mr. Shepherd. He told her after the *matinée* this afternoon."

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"Poor Dido. It was all too good to last. What are you going to do, Caliban?"

He sighed. "My National Service, I suppose. Can't put it off any longer."

"And Dido?"

"Felix has plans for her. He'll give her something."

"Yes, he'll give her something." No matter how much we despised him he'd always give us something.

We were folding the stage-cloth. I remembered the first day and how I had begged him to fold it correctly; he had done so ever since. "You've been a great help, Caliban."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Shepherd, if I may ask?"

"I don't know. I thought of giving it all up."

"But you can't do that. It's in your blood!" He looked shocked at the very idea.

"That's rather what I fear. It may be bad blood."

"It would be terrible. Dido would never forgive you. Neither would I." He blushed at his words and stammered, "It would be like running away."

"I suppose it would. And is that so awful?"

"Terrible. Think of what Mr. Bale would say."

Think of what Mr. Bale would say; think of what Uncle Frank would say; think of what dear Felix would say. At least he was offering a future in place of a past. The Shepherds had overthrown the Osbornes at last. That was worth cheering for. Now it might almost be worth while staying the course.

"You're probably right."

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"Oh, I'm sure I am."

The stage was clear. He went round collecting the tools, the screw-eyes, the clouts. The stage carpenter ambled up to say, "All finished? Got the next show waiting. Four vans outside. I'd like to get it in."

There would always be a next show waiting, and a next and a next. "Carry on. We're just going."

Caliban said, "I wish we were just starting," and for that I could have kissed him. Dear Caliban, dear honest, sentimental Caliban. How much I agreed with him. And I thought of the day I had stood on the stage and felt myself one with all actors, past and present, and knew almost with relief that escape was impossible.

In a quiet way the knowledge came. There was no future without the theatre. It was in me as my mother's blood was in me but now the two things were reconciled. The obsession was an obsession no longer. Now I could begin to live again.

It is never easy to come to terms with life but that night when I walked through the dressing-rooms, I felt as if a tremendous argument had just been resolved. The new compromise had just been reached. I had done very little that was praiseworthy on this tour and a great deal which was almost criminal, but nevertheless it still felt like victory and not a defeat. Perhaps after all Uncle Frank and Aunt Victoria had known what they were doing when they claimed me for the stage. I should never have been happy in anything else.

The dressing-rooms were clear. Stained Kleenex littered the tables, overflowed from the wastepaper

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baskets. In Alex's room there was nothing to be seen but a discarded tube of grease-paint. I don't know what I expected to find. Not a bottle of tablets, not a photograph. Just a tube of grease-paint. There was some sort of message in that I thought. It took me a long time to see it but I think I have got it now.

I shut the doors and collected my coat.

Caliban shouted, "Coming for coffee, Mr. Shepherd?"

"Coming, Caliban."

So the next morning I phoned Felix. I stood in the box and heard the bell ringing in the Villa Bellarosa, Lymington. He came. "Yeth?" he said, "yeth?"

"Felix, this is Sebastian. I've been thinking over that job you offered me."

"Oh." That was all. Just, "Oh."

This is a fine thing, I thought. Now that I want it he's not going to let me have it. "Is the offer still open? If so, I want it."

He hesitated. You could almost see him thinking, is he really worth it? Look how he let me down over *Storm Thunder*. "Well . . . I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Either it is or it isn't. Don't waste my sixpences."

"Well . . . all right. Yeth, it ith."

"Good. Now look, Felix, I'll come round and discuss it in the morning. There are one or two things I'm going to insist on right from the beginning."

"Wha'?" The panic in his voice. "Wha'?"

Never you mind. I'm not going to be hurried over the phone. My conditions, one, two, three. Very professional, very business-like. All right?"

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"But look, Bath——!"

"Fine, Felix. Give my love to Miss Fingelstein.

"Who?"

I rang off. This is a beginning, I thought. You can't turn back now. Let Uncle Frank rest in peace. He's been the scapegoat for so long. Now start taking the blame yourself.

When I carried my bags to the station, the sun was trying to break through the mist. Children were playing in the street. There was almost a hint of spring in the air. I wondered about that. I could feel the tingle in my blood. And then I realized what it was. It was as if an overture had just started somewhere.

